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## THE ROCHESTER REPORT – WHERE NOW?

David Phillips

In July the General Synod of the Church of England will be asked to give an answer to the question, should the Church move to produce legislation that permits women to be Bishops? You might imagine that this question would have been put when the Synod debated the Rochester Report in February. In fact there were two debates but neither of them actually dealt with the substantive question. The first, lasting over two and half hours of the Wednesday morning was on the content of the Report. Since there was a general view that the Rochester commission had done a reasonable job in representing fairly the different views that exist within the Church there was little doubt that after debate the report would be noted. In the afternoon there was a much shorter debate in which the Synod was asked to decide whether it should return to the matter in July. Whilst there was opposition to this motion it appeared that many who are against the principle either supported this motion or at least abstained.

Therefore, in July the Synod will be asked specifically whether to set in train the process leading to legislation to permit women Bishops. The actual drafting of legislation and endorsement of it will then wait until a new General Synod has been elected in August/September. Synod will be required to debate the legislation on at least three further occasions with the final approval debate being one that will require a two-thirds majority in each of the houses of laity, clergy and bishops. The measure would be scrutinised by the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament and if they deem it 'expedient' will have to be approved by Parliament itself before being given the Royal Assent. This will be a lengthy process.

If, as seems likely, the Synod votes to proceed in July this does not guarantee that legislation will be enacted. It is possible that, even though every other vote goes through, there will be a third of the laity who vote against at Final Approval. Since the composition of Synod will change in the autumn it is not yet possible to tell how things might go at the final hurdle.

The success or failure of the legislation may well turn on what provision is made for opponents. There are those on Synod who, out of concern for fellowship, will not wish to vote for something that will drive friends out of the Church. Others will be more concerned with the potential loss of clergy and of laity giving. According to the official figures a total of 410 clergy left the Church of England following the decision to ordain women as priests. This figure does not include those who left but did not qualify for or did not seek the financial provision. I think I could produce a list of 20, perhaps 30, evangelical clergy I know who left the Church, at least in part, because of the 1992 decision (it is also claimed that 33 members of General Synod left the Church of England after the vote in 1992). I do not know how influential these concerns will be since on the other side are women in ordained ministry who would feel spurned and the claims that others will leave, or not join the Church if this change is not made.

It would be possible for the Synod to proceed to legislation without making any provision for opponents (called the 'one-line measure' option) and there will be those pushing for this. In addition to the other considerations given above there are two other matters, which may influence this. First, there are promises given last time around that the views of opponents would be respected. A single line measure would break those promises and since the promises were given to the Ecclesiastical Committee (E.C.) of Parliament this could do serious damage to the prospects of legislation. However, it is the E.C. itself that is the other consideration and again it is simply not possible to tell how they might respond not least because there will be at least one General Election

before the matter reaches them. Moreover, we cannot guarantee their benevolence; there is a very different attitude within Parliament to the Church of England and to gender issues as compared to 1992. If the Church opts by majority for gender equality the E.C. has a duty to consider the effect of this on those who disagree with the change, as they did in 1992. However, the E.C. could argue that more recent Human Rights legislation overrides all other issues and therefore refuse to make provision for opponents.

If it is to be the Church itself that makes provision for those who believe the innovation is wrong then the thing which ought to persuade them is that we who disagree do so because we believe what almost all Christians have believed for 2,000 years, and what is still the majority view of those who claim to be Christian churches today. To legislate to exclude such a position from the Church of England would be to sever the Church from historic Christianity and to make it just another sect. It would destroy the claims to comprehensiveness, which many appear to love. It would also accelerate the decline of the Church into rampant and unchecked revisionism, not least because those who care most about the historical continuity of our faith would have left.

There are therefore very strong reasons why provision should be made for opponents, even if these things do not dissuade people from the folly of pressing ahead. Provision will be made more likely if those seeking it are united and clear in what they wish for. But this presents us with a real dilemma.

Church Society Council has consistently held that the consecration of women as Bishops is wrong, because the ordination of women as priests/presbyters is wrong. Recently the Council resolved “That this Council;

- a) is committed to the supremacy, exclusivity, inerrancy and infallibility of Holy Scripture;
- b) is therefore convinced that the office of presbyter in the Church should be occupied by men only;
- c) for the benefit of the whole Church and the gospel witness, will oppose the consecration of Women as Bishops.”

Our dilemma is that we do not wish to push for provision if this makes it appear that we can be bought off. We believe that the consecration of women as Bishops, like the ordination of women as priests is wrong, it is contrary to God’s revealed will. It is not a matter of first-order or second-order, it is simply a matter of faithfulness to Christ. We believe that if the Church takes this further step it will accelerate its collapse, numerically, theologically and ethically. Because we are loyal members of the Church of England we do not want to see these things happen. Our concern for others means that our first concern is that the Church should not take this step.

But let us suppose, for the sake of argument at least, that legislation does now go ahead. What would this mean for those who disagree and particularly for evangelicals? The Rochester report itself sets out four broad approaches that might be followed to give some provision for opponents. In addition, because of the wider problems in the Anglican Communion many prefer to see this issue within a broader context. In the two following articles I attempt to give my own impressions of what these things might mean.