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THE MANCHESTER REPORT

Another debate (or four) on Women Bishops.

By David Phillips

How do you square a circle? This is the dilemma faced by the Church of England regarding legislation to consecrate women as Bishops. The General Synod has agreed in principle to go ahead and consecrate women but until actual legislation has been finally agreed with 2/3rds of the laity, clergy and bishops voting in favour the decision has not been made. To date, at least, the Synod has expressed a desire to accommodate those who cannot in conscience accept the innovation. The problem, for the innovators, is that to permit dissent might be construed as calling into question the validity of women's ministry and certainly means that women will face limits on the exercise of their ministry which men do not. For example, there are around 1,000 parochial posts which are currently closed to women priests.

The latest attempt to square the circle was made by a group under the chairmanship of the Bishop of Manchester set up at the behest of the General Synod. The group did a valiant job which in the end consisted of listing the various options and choosing some to sideline, some to flesh out a bit and some to explore in depth. Their report was released in April and considered by the College of all the Bishops and then by the House of Bishops in May. It is important to recognise that the House of Bishops is unrepresentative of the wider Church and in particular that despite our numbers there are no conservative evangelical members. Since there is institutional discrimination against conservative evangelicals no-one should be surprised if the outcome is deemed unjust and unacceptable.

However, the Bishops did have to make some decision about what to bring to General Synod. Last year when they received a report on TEA (Transferred Episcopal Arrangements) they could not agree. This time a majority has decided on a way forward, though only because they are unrepresentative. The motion, which now goes to General Synod, is that legislation should be drafted and then debated to permit women Bishops, to repeal all existing provision for those opposed (that means no more Resolutions A & B and no more Flying Bishops) and to simply produce a code of practice which no-one yet knows what it will say or not say.

What the Manchester Report has therefore done is clarify the thinking of the majority of the House of Bishops that there were certain options which they are not prepared to consider. Therefore it is worthwhile noting what they have rejected.

Approaches

The Manchester Group considered a wide range of options and set these out as three broad approaches.

1. A non-binding code of practice with the repeal of existing protection.
2. Legislative provision within the existing structures.
3. The creation of new structures.

There were two further options which the Group was not authorised to consider:

Making no provision whatsoever for opponents.

Not going ahead with legislation.

Under the second approach (legislation and existing structures) the Report considers four variants:

2.1 A statutory code of practice. Existing safeguards would be repealed but the code would have legal force. The concern about this is how such a code would be enforced if people chose to abuse it.

The idea of repealing the existing safeguards appears to repudiate the promises made to the Ecclesiastical Committee in 1992 that legal safeguards would remain as long as they were required. Of course the devious will argue that a statutory code does amount to legal safeguards.

2.2 A statutory code but retaining existing provision. Thus legislation would allow parishes to refuse the ministry of a woman priest but not a woman bishop, though the code might provide some protection for conscience.

2.3 The third variant allows for the delegation of episcopal functions. This is similar to the present arrangement with flying bishops but the functions to be delegated would be increased. It is only, however, delegation, so a woman Bishop would still have episcopal authority and this would not be an acceptable arrangement.

2.4 Powers would be transferred rather than delegated. Existing Diocesan Bishops, Suffragans and Flying Bishops would take on parishes so transferring. This is similar to the TEA arrangements proposed last year which Church Society and others argued could work if strengthened and if evangelical Bishops were consecrated as a result.

The third option considered by the report is therefore some sort of new structure. They did not put forward our view that these structures should be completely new nor did they accept the ideas for a new province (in fact they refused even to hear representatives of the Third Province Movement) and instead proposed new Dioceses. They argued that this was easy to understand and of all the options in the report it is the one most likely to satisfy opponents, even though it would not be without problems.

July Motion.

Having considered the report the Bishops by a simple majority have voted to put before Synod a motion allowing for a code of practice (apparently binding). If agreed a draft code would be prepared for February 2009. It is next to impossible that the General Synod would not vote for any option which provided more protection for those opposed not least because the Bishops could block any such amendments themselves. The resolution does not spell it out but existing safeguards would be repealed.

One possible outcome is that this option will persuade more people who agree in principle that going ahead now will cause too many problems however, the point at which this is likely to be decided is not until the final approval debate, probably in July 2010 and it is not possible to know whether people might not change their mind at the last minute as happened in 1992.

Therefore, we must expect that the legislation will go through and begin to plan accordingly.

On the face of it anglo-Catholics are far more united than evangelicals. They have structures in place including the flying bishops and others which they could utilise to take a stand against legislation. However, as happened after 1992 they might also find many leaving for Rome would further weaken those who remain. Nevertheless it is the threat of further departures and possible principled action which may deter some against voting for legislation.

The threat from evangelicals is less tangible and not simply because we are fewer in number but

because evangelicals are often ambivalent about church structures and episcopacy and inclined to carry on regardless. But, sooner or later it will become impossible for conservative evangelicals to enter the Church of England ministry and to be appointed to parishes. As happened in North America the drain of conservative evangelicals and conservative catholics will lead to a denomination dominated by liberal catholics and open evangelicals and the latter will have little power to resist the former.

What then are the options for conservative evangelicals?

Some incline to a mixture of fatalism and optimism. Things have been far worse in the past they say, the problem is the judgement of God and the solution is a sovereign work of God, until that day we must labour on regardless. It is hard to argue against some of the logic but it ignores the fact the Church of England may not have a future in the plans of God.

A second approach is to seek common cause with anglo-Catholics. They, it is argued, are “credally orthodox” and they already have some structures in place. There would certainly be strength in numbers. But this is a hard camel for many to swallow given our history as evangelicals and the fact that we believe that the advent of anglo-Catholicism lies at the heart of the present problems (they of course blame Protestantism for the same thing).

Thirdly, some have decided that the Church of England is a dying institution, financially crippled, increasingly ignored and declining numerically. Their solution is not to prop up the structures but to disregard them and take whatever steps are necessary to continue gospel witness as the institution crumbles.

These are strategies being pursued either consciously or unconsciously. Many are frustrated that no-one provides a lead whilst those who are trying to lead are frustrated that that others quibble about details or will not follow. It may be that this diversity will yet prove to be our strength but at present the lack of unanimity seems to be a cause for concern.

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