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WOMEN BISHOPS

By David Phillips

I have now been editing *Cross†Way* for 12 years and at times it feels as though every issue has had an article on Women Bishops. It is not quite that bad, but I have written 13 articles on this subject over that time and I was therefore tempted to put the word 'again' in the title. However, matters have now reached a critical point and so, with some reluctance, I am returning to the subject.

July Debates

In July the General Synod again considered the legislation to consecrate Women as Bishops. For debate was the report of the Revision Committee in what is known as the Revision Stage of legislation. It was another marathon session with nearly 12 hours of debate.

The underlying issue is fairly simple – the legislation, if passed, will permit women to be consecrated as Bishops. The sticking point remains what should be done, if anything, for those who remain convinced that this development is wrong. It is an important issue not only because of the need to deal fairly with those who disagree with a majority decision in the church, but because those who dissent hold to a view that was held by the vast majority of Christians through the ages.

The July debate always looked like being a bit of a waste of time. The votes on the main motions and on amendments require a simple majority, but it is possible for Synod members to request a vote by houses and if this happens each of the three Houses – Bishops, Clergy and Laity – vote separately. As a result a vote is much more likely to be lost and it was always to be expected that any amendments to the legislation as agreed by the Revision Committee would be very unlikely to pass.

Thus, if there was to be any significant change to the legislation to make it more acceptable, that change would have to have come through the Revision Committee. But a Revision Committee is made up of two groups. There is a smaller Steering Committee, which must be made up of people who are in favour of the legislation, and then there is the remainder of the Revision Committee, usually just forming a majority and chosen in order to give a balance of views. This means that it is very difficult even for a Revision Committee to get significant changes to legislation.

Despite this interim reports from the Revision Committee suggested that they might be willing to make provision which was more in line with what we had been asking for. As it turned out the Committee agreed that there should be better provision, but could not agree on what that provision should be in practice. So, the legislation that came back to General Synod in July was inadequate.

We had pushed for two things in particular. First, that the provision should be part of legislation rather than just part of a code of practice. The current provision in relation to the ordination of women (what are called Resolutions A & B) is in the primary legislation approved and protected by Parliament, though some aspects (what is called Resolution C – flying Bishops) is in an Act of Synod which is more like a code of practice.

Secondly, and more importantly, we had insisted that those who might otherwise come under a woman Bishop should be able to opt for the oversight of a male Bishop and that the alternative oversight should include jurisdiction. This is not the case with the flying Bishops at present. In particular, the oversight would include such things as sponsorship for selection, training, deployment and discipline. The Revision Committee did not concede any of these points, which

was hardly surprising.

At General Synod therefore various attempts were made to put these matters before the whole Synod but these all failed. In addition the two Archbishops made a late intervention by introducing their own amendment. To some extent this undermined the other amendments because it was always more likely that the Archbishops would get their motion approved. The Archbishops are to be commended for this action which was an attempt to preserve the Church of England which is threatening to crash into the rocks and break apart on their watch. The vote could have been interpreted as a test of their authority but fortunately most refused to see it that way. The problem they faced was that they introduced a new idea which was quite difficult to understand and I am still not sure I understand it. They argued for the introduction of co-ordinate jurisdiction.

There is a view that sees the Bishop as having absolute jurisdiction in his (or possibly her) Diocese. This is a misunderstanding because in the Church of England the jurisdiction of Bishops is very much limited and constrained by law. There are situations therefore in which more than one Bishop has jurisdiction. For example, according to Halsbury's Ecclesiastical Law all Bishops are in some sense suffragans of the Archbishop. The Archbishop of Canterbury is Primate of All England whilst the Archbishop of York is Primate of England. In certain situations, albeit very limited, the law allows the Archbishop to intervene in the affairs of a Diocese.

Their idea was to introduce co-ordinate jurisdiction, which would allow under conditions to be agreed, that the Diocesan Bishops would have jurisdiction in reference to some matters but another Bishop would have jurisdiction in relation to other matters. This sort of curiosity abounds in the Church of England because of the way things have developed, but it is a different matter to introduce it through new legislation. When it came to it the proposal was agreed by the Houses of Laity and Bishops but was rejected by the House of Clergy. Here, as in at least one previous debate, the majority was willing to make better provision, but the vote was still lost.

For myself, whilst being grateful for the attempt by the Archbishops, I fear that the motion, if passed, would have proved very difficult and could have meant a quite unsatisfactory compromise, which we were under pressure to accept precisely because it was a last minute compromise.

The Synod rejected this amendment with all others and voted to take the legislation to the next stage.

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