

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Autumn 2010 No. 118

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WOMEN BISHOPS THE NEXT STAGE

By David Phillips

The legislation to consecrate women as Bishops has passed the Revision Stage at General Synod. There are now several other steps that have to happen and until they have been gone through there will not be women Bishops consecrated. It is by no means certain that the legislation will be passed:

1. Referral to Dioceses
2. Debates at Diocesan Synod
3. Production of a Code of Practice
4. Debates on the Code of Practice.
5. Consideration by the House of Bishops.
6. Final Approval Debate.
7. Consideration by the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament.
8. Laid before Parliament.
9. Royal Assent.
10. Date set by the Archbishops.
11. Legislation comes into force.
12. First woman Bishop consecrated.

As can be seen there is plenty of scope for future Cross†Way articles.

Final Approval

The Final Approval debate at General Synod requires each of the three houses of General Synod to vote in favour by a 2/3rds majority. In 1991 the vote on women Priests was passed clearly in the houses of Clergy and Bishops but only passed by a couple of votes in the house of Laity. To date when debating women Bishops there have been at least two occasions when crucial votes were passed, but they did not command a 2/3rds majority of the laity, nevertheless the process continued because only a simple majority was required.

If the legislation contains adequate provision for those opposed there are indications that many people will vote in favour. However, both evangelicals and anglo-Catholics have made it clear that the legislation as it now stands is unacceptable to large numbers and many are talking of leaving. It is possible that many who are in favour of women Bishops in principle will be unwilling to vote for the legislation.

However, in 1991, there were a number of people who had been against women Priests who on the day voted in favour. Some were put under immense pressure, some were visited personally in their homes by supporters. Some felt that it was better for the legislation to go ahead so that the debates would not continue to cripple the Church. This could all happen again.

The determining factor, which is unclear at the present, is the composition of the General Synod. By mid-October the election of the new Synod will be complete. Our hope is that more people will have been elected this time who are clear on this issue and will continue to vote against this legislation, certainly if it remains unchanged. It therefore remains a real possibility that when the legislation comes back to Synod in 2012 it will be voted down.

Referral to the Dioceses

Because of its importance the Business Committee of General Synod must refer this legislation to the Dioceses for consideration. I am not aware that they have yet done this, but they must do so soon.

Each Diocesan Synod will be required to debate the legislation and will be able, if it chooses, to likewise refer the matter to Deanery Synods. The final decision at each Diocesan Synod, and the voting figures must be recorded and reported back to the Business Committee.

The Business Committee will then produce a report stating whether the majority of Diocesan Synods approved or disapproved the business together with the various votes. The Business Committee may ask each Diocesan Bishop to also record their view on the matter.

It is not possible for a Diocesan Synod to amend the legislation, they must say either yes or no. However, it is understood that Dioceses will allow a following motion to be put and this could then be referred back to the Business Committee. The following motion would call for the legislation to be changed to allow for greater provision before it goes for final approval.

Therefore, it is important to identify members of Diocesan Synods who will speak against this legislation and attempt to put a following motion. In some Dioceses they are going to be a lonely voice, but such a voice must be heard. In others they will have a lot of support.

We should be under no illusions about the possibility of success. There are those, and plenty of them, who are so convinced that they are right on this matter, and are so convinced that it is a primary gospel issue, that they are willing to lose anyone who does not agree with them. I can understand the logic of this position, and recognise that it is identical to those arguing for the full inclusion of homosexuals, but I find it astonishing. What they appear to be saying is that someone who holds the views of, say, Richard Hooker, or Paul of Tarsus, could not be a member of the Church of England. It seems to me that once you start excluding Apostles from your Church you have ceased to be part of the Apostolic Church.

Reconsideration by the House of Bishops

If there is a strong groundswell against the legislation as it stands, then the Synod will have the option of asking the House of Bishops to reconsider the legislation and bring further amendments before final approval. This is the only route by which adequate provision can now be made, otherwise the legislation will either fall, or if it is passed do so without such provision.

Code of Practice

The Code of Practice presents a problem. In my view the legislation as it now stands is unacceptable and it will make no difference what is put in the Code of Practice because it simply cannot allow what is necessary. However, I recognise that people have different thresholds on these things and some who are opposed may be willing to work within the proposed legislation and that for their sake the code needs to be strong.

The Code is now being worked on by a group of Bishops and some do appear to want to use it to make the provision as strong as possible within what is allowed by the legislation. This Code, however, will come back to General Synod where any debates will only require a simple majority and it is quite possible that Synod will vote to weaken whatever the Bishops produce. All along there has been a problem that people have said that the code will help matters but no-one has yet seen a code and cannot know how good, or bad it will be.

If your parish has passed either of the Resolutions A or B under the Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure then make sure your PCC knows that if this legislation comes into force those resolutions

will be swept away. You may be permitted to express a similar desire under the code, or you may not, but it will not have the force of law. Some will be aware of situations in which Dioceses have attempted to manipulate the present process, even though it is in legislation, and we have found people more than willing to ignore or attempt to circumvent codes of practice in relation to other legislation such as appointments and re-organisations.

Ecclesiastical Committee

In the run up to the women Priests legislation it was the Ecclesiastical Committee who put on the brakes and insisted on proper provision. Whilst this is still possible we are dubious that the composition of the new House of Commons will lead to a Committee that would have the same concerns. One of the members of the Committee indeed asserted that if the legislation falls in Synod they may attempt to bring it through Parliament.

This legislation still has a long road to travel and it is still uncertain whether it will be passed, but the possible outcomes are reducing rapidly and it is necessary to consider what will happen in various scenarios.

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