

The Ordination of Women as Priests

2012 is the 20th anniversary of the first ordinations of women priests in Australia, and the passing of the General Synod Law of the Church of England Clarification Canon. It is under this canon, once adopted by a diocese, that women priests are ordained. The canon is currently operative in 18 of the 23 dioceses of the Anglican Church of Australia, in which there are now 452 women priests and two women bishops. A third Australian woman bishop will be consecrated this year.

An outline of the clarification canon, an account of the journey to women priests in this country, and concise summaries of the main arguments for and against women priests are provided in this document.

Law of the Church of England Clarification Canon 1992

In 1992 General Synod passed a canon - the Law of the Church of England Clarification Canon 1992 - repealing any inherited law of the Church of England which might prevent the ordination of women priests in Australia. This canon was originally the suggestion of David Bleby then an Adelaide QC and chairman of the General Synod Canon Law Commission, now a justice of the SA Supreme Court. It was a stroke of genius, for it united all those who supported women's ordination.

At the earlier General Synods, part of the difficulty had been in persuading all supporters even to accept the notion of a canon specifically legislating for women priests. A minority took the view espoused by the Revd Janet Gaden, that legislation for women priests was 'repugnant': 'If the priesting of women requires legislation, while the priesting of men does not and never has, to priest women under legislation is to create two orders of priests. We would have a situation where women are ordained under law, and men by grace alone.'

David Bleby's proposal was simply to repeal whatever stood in the way of ordaining women; the only possibility was an unidentified law of the Church of England, somehow still in force despite the adoption of the Australian constitution in 1961. Even this idea was relatively new, having only come to the fore in the 1991 decision of the Appellate Tribunal on a reference on women priests. That Tribunal found by a six-to-one majority that there was an inherited law of the Church of England applicable to and in force in the Australian dioceses at the time the Constitution took effect and still applying. This prevented a bishop from ordaining a woman to the priesthood without either General Synod or diocesan legislation that would over-ride the inherited law. (Earlier Tribunal decisions had consistently suggested there was no such inhibition and that therefore legislation was not necessary.)

Repealing an inherited prohibition, however shadowy, was as effective as direct legislation, without the problems that direct legislation would have brought for those who responded as Janet Gaden had. Certainly its passage through General Synod was marked by a welcome unity from supporters of women's ordination, in contrast to the disarray that had troubled earlier General Synod attempts. There was, for a brief time, also hope that it might appeal to some opponents because a vote for the bill was not, strictly speaking, a vote in favour of women priests. That

hope, however, died a swift death; as far as is known, not unexpectedly, no one voted for it on that basis.

Being a canon that affected ‘the ritual, ceremonial or discipline of this Church’, it could not come into force in any diocese ‘unless and until the diocese by ordinance adopts the said canon’. To date the canon is in force in 18 of the 23 Australian dioceses. It has not been adopted in the dioceses of Ballarat, North West Australia, Sydney or The Murray; it was briefly adopted by the Diocese of Armidale (to validate eucharistic celebrations at the time by women deacons functioning as chaplains) and then repealed.

In passing the Clarification Canon, General Synod did not make any special provisions for those opposed to women priests. Their pastoral care has been provided pastorally and informally from within the diocese concerned. The reality is that, in those dioceses that have ordained women priests, opposition has dwindled markedly among Anglo-Catholics as they have experienced the ministry of women clergy. This has been the ‘converting factor’. Generally, people are more frightened of a new idea than of a new reality; once women priests are introduced in a diocese and their ministry is experienced, they are generally warmly accepted by the vast majority quite quickly. This is discussed more fully below.

According to the latest available statistics, there are 452 women priests in the Anglican Church of Australia; the largest number (92) are in Melbourne, with 74 in Brisbane, 51 in Perth, 39 in Canberra and Goulburn, 34 in Tasmania, 25 in Newcastle, and 24 in Adelaide. There are also two women bishops in the Anglican Church of Australia, one each in Perth and Melbourne; a third will be consecrated in Canberra and Goulburn in March 2012.

The Journey to Women Priests in Australia

The background

The issue of women’s ordination came to Australia as it was becoming a significant movement in the Anglican Communion worldwide in the early 1970s. It had first been mooted in the mid-19th century by pioneer American feminists as much concerned for women’s role in the church as for female suffrage, but was not seriously taken up by mainstream churches until after the First World War. It was strongly resisted, mainly because church leaders insisted on a divinely-instituted ‘female inferiority’. The bishops of the Anglican Communion, meeting at the 1920 Lambeth Conference, said that while women would one day share a spiritual equality with men in the spiritual world that was to come, in the ‘present world of action... man has a priority’. Marriage and motherhood summed up women’s God-given vocation, they said.

But the notion that women’s spiritual equality existed in this world was not easily suppressed, even if it took hold in the mainstream churches only in fits and starts in the 20th century. By the late 1960s, it was gaining significant ground at last. In Australia, the Methodist Church ordained its first women clergy in 1969, followed by the Presbyterian Church in 1974. The smaller Congregational Church had had women ministers since the 1920s. The Uniting Church, formed from all three churches in 1977, began its life with a strong contingent of women clergy.

The first Anglican woman priest had been ordained in the Diocese of Hong Kong in 1944. At that time, Li Tim Oi, technically a deaconess though she was effectively functioning as a deacon, was leading the Anglican parish in Macao, a church packed with war refugees. Male priests visited to celebrate the sacraments, but in time this became impossible as the Japanese occupation intensified. Rather than leave the parishioners without sacramental ministry, the far-sighted Bishop R.O. Hall of Hong Kong decided to ordain her as a priest. Recognising in her the charism of priesthood, he decided it was better to break church order by ordaining her than leave the people without sacraments in what was clearly a time of critical pastoral emergency. Her gender was a secondary consideration in terms of her obvious leadership gifts and the needs of her flock, he later explained to the Archbishop of Canterbury. The ordination was clandestine, with both Bishop Hall and Li Tim Oi undertaking dangerous journeys across enemy lines to meet in the mainland city of Zhaoqing.

Once word leaked out, her ordination was roundly condemned, and for many years she was forced to lay aside her orders. As the Cultural Revolution took hold in China, she was totally forgotten by the Anglican world, emerging years later to return quietly to priestly ministry once women priests had gained wider acceptance. Her Diocese, Hong Kong, initiated the next stage as well, ordaining two more women priests in 1971 after the 1968 Lambeth Bishops' Conference had re-opened the question and the newly-formed Anglican Consultative Council had given its approval. Later in the 1970s, women were ordained in the United States (1974) Canada (1976) and New Zealand (1977).

Australia

At the same time, in 1977, the Australian Anglican Church decided by General Synod resolution that theological objections did not constitute a barrier to the ordination of women. This resolution followed the recommendation of a report on the ministry of women prepared by the General Synod Commission on Doctrine. All but one of the 12 members of the Commission – which included a stellar array of bishops and theologians – agreed with the recommendation that theologically there was nothing to stop women being ordained. But the twelfth member, Sydney theologian Broughton Knox, argued against women's ordination on the same grounds it is still opposed in Sydney today (see below). Knox, the Principal of Moore Theological College for 26 years, wielded an extraordinary influence on the thinking of Sydney's clergy, including its current leadership. His views would never be lightly overthrown by them, so the fact that he established the anti-women's ordination position, and the terms in which he established it, have cemented it in Sydney ideology. It is sobering to realise that the minority view of one person effectively delayed the full implementation of the General Synod resolution for more than 30 years.

The 1977 motion, passed by an overall 60 per cent majority, had recommended that the church 'take the appropriate steps when practicable' to enable women to be ordained. The ideal clearly was for the door to be opened to women in all three orders at the same time, but that was not to be. Those 'appropriate steps' would prove to be the sticking point, and the second two in particular – women as priests and bishops - would be extremely difficult to achieve. They ended up being separated by 15 years. That strong 1977 majority, while welcome, was not sufficient. If General Synod legislation for women clergy was required, a minimum of two-thirds majorities in each of the three houses of General Synod – clergy, laity and bishops – would be necessary. Then those same majorities would need to be repeated at a subsequent General Synod meeting.

Many had hoped that legislation would not be needed, not just to avoid the synodical demands but as a matter of principle, given that there is no specific legislation for the ordination of male clergy in the Australian church's constitution. Early decisions of the Appellate Tribunal, the Anglican Church of Australia's highest legal body, suggested that legislation might not be necessary. In 1980 it had decided that the Fundamental Declarations of the national church's constitution did not preclude opening all three orders of ministry to women and that there was no doctrine embodied in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer that would prevent their ordination either. A 1985 Tribunal decision took it one step further, saying that the ordination of women would not contravene any principle of the Church of England embodied in the Book of Common Prayer, the Ordinal or the 39 Articles. This was later interpreted to mean that no canon of General Synod was needed for the ordination of women.

Nevertheless, legislation was pursued, largely to put the matter beyond doubt and as a means of ensuring sufficient support for change, but just one in a succession of attempts passed readily – the 1985 canon for women deacons, which received more than 75 per cent of votes in each house of the General Synod. At that same General Synod, although the overall vote in favour was almost 70 per cent, a canon for women priests failed by just a few votes in the House of Clergy. Subsequent attempts failed in 1987 and 1989 until finally, in November 1992, General Synod passed the Law of the Church of England Clarification Canon, permitting women to be priests. Between 1987 and 1992, several diocesan-based attempts had been made to break the impasse, just one of which, in the Diocese of Perth, succeeded. Thus the first Australian ordination of women priests was in Perth in March 1992, under local authorisation; that event became the single most important factor in ensuring the ultimate success of the 1992 General Synod canon.

When women were first ordained priest in Australia, as elsewhere, some were subjected to vitriolic personal abuse that could only have had its origins in psycho-sexual issues. Some women priests were spat at, at the altar, for instance. Though the more grotesque manifestations of this reaction have calmed down, there is still some open ribaldry about women in holy orders. At least one woman named as a possible bishop was the subject of offensive sexist ridicule on a blog site.

Arguments for and against the ordination of women

For

Support for the ordination of women to all three orders in the church is based on the understanding that the overwhelming trajectory of Scripture points to the 'essential equality, dignity, and complementarity of the whole of humanity before God'. Both men and women 'serve with equal authority in the universal ministry of representing God within the whole created order'. The texts which seem to mitigate against this, noted below, need to be understood in the light of the overall picture presented by the scriptural witness.

This picture begins with Genesis 1:27: 'so God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them'. This is the foundation on which the biblical view of men and women in relation to God and to each other is built. The following verse – in which God gives the man and woman together dominion over everything on earth – is

a statement of joint leadership and authority. Here is no hint of the subjection of one to the other, but of real equality. Eve, as the equal partner of Adam, is the ‘crowning, completing work of creation’.

If Genesis taught that women could not hold positions of authority - which it does not - the reference would hold for the whole of the created order. The issue of women's ordination would be a minor one compared with the prohibition on women in any leadership position, from monarch to prime minister to school principal. An order of creation, by definition, cannot just be about order in the family or the church. The leadership of women in society, the family and the church stands or falls together. The supposed theological principle of Trinitarian subordinationism (see below), if it were true and if it did actually have anything to say about male/female relationships, would surely apply to all those relationships, and not just in the home and the church. Subordinationism takes the church into far more dangerous theological waters than the ordination of women ever could.

In reality, God’s blueprint of equality was disrupted by human sinfulness. One outworking of that was the domination of women by men, a pattern that has persisted for millennia, and that human civilization continues to struggle with as it emerges from long centuries of patriarchal rule. That order, where woman and men were locked in a conflictual, damaged relationship in the unredeemed creation, has been swept aside in the new creation inaugurated by Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, women were restored to their rightful place in Jesus’ own radical, full acceptance of women in his ministry. His first Resurrection appearances to women make this restoration plain. He empowered Mary Magdalene to be the ‘apostle to the apostles’, sending her to be the first witness of his Resurrection. In the early church, there are many examples of women in leadership - in the Acts of the Apostles, and in the letters to the Romans, the Philippians, and to Timothy, for instance. St Paul spoke of named women as his co-workers, and provided the foundational theological truth governing the relationships between men and women when he proclaimed the restoration in Christ of male/female equality: ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3:28).

Against

1. The Evangelical ‘headship’ argument

This argument was that depended on by Broughton Knox in his dissent from the 1977 report of the General Synod Doctrine Commission. In creating humanity, Knox said in his minority report, God gave a ‘headship to man which he did not give to woman’. This headship was ‘in every sphere of life’, though it is in marriage ‘that this relation of headship and subordination is most clearly expressed and experienced’. Nature itself, he argued, teaches ‘that man is the head of woman’. Women could not lead in the Christian congregation because a woman who is subordinate to her husband must not ‘be over him in the things of God in the congregation’. This applied to unmarried women as well, he claimed, though he did not explain how this might operate.

Knox linked this subordination of women to what he claimed was the subordination of Christ to God the Father within the Trinity. This convenient understanding of the Trinity has steadily gained widespread support in Sydney, much to the alarm of mainstream Australian theologians, some of whom have regarded it as close to heresy. Linking the subordination of women with the supposed subordination of Christ helped sustain the claim that male ‘headship’ was not to be

seen as dominance. Rather, Knox insisted, male headship had 'as its only object the true welfare of woman' even though men, being sinful human beings, had often misused their leadership role. This had provoked rejection by women of the subordinate role, he claimed. The 'headship' doctrine is applied only to male/female relationships in the church and the home, and not to the role of women in wider society. This is a significant departure from 19th century 'female inferiority' church teaching, that women could not lead at all, not just in the church or the home. This view of 'headship' remains the main - indeed the sole - reason why conservative Evangelicals continue to oppose the ordination of women. They claim it is the only truly biblical position.

The 'headship' argument is based on a range of texts from New Testament letters, such as 1 Timothy 2: 11-15:

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

and Colossians 3: 18-19: 'Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.'

Over recent decades, numerous scholars have refuted the interpretation that conservative Evangelicals bring to these texts. They have argued that texts such as these are culturally conditioned, relating to the immediate context of the churches to whom the writers directed their letters of instruction. They may have reflected an anxiety to make Christianity more culturally acceptable (women leaders not being part of the first and second century world view), a prejudiced reaction to competent women leaders, or a response to a particular problem in a specific congregation. Most scholars argue that they are not prescriptive in the contemporary world.

There have been many attempts to resolve these differences in biblical interpretation. If anything, however, the conservative Evangelical view has become more entrenched, and totally impervious to alternative views. Its promoters present it as the only interpretation that is faithful to Scripture and claim that those who promote the ordination of women are totally unbiblical in their views, driven by secular notions of equal rights. This is inaccurate. All who have worked consistently for women's ordination over many years have done so principally because they believe the full equality of women and men reflects the new creation established in Christ's resurrection, as explained above.

2. The traditionalist argument

In the early years of the women's ordination debate in Australia, the conservative Evangelical opposition was bolstered by traditionalist Anglo-Catholics not just in small rural dioceses but in major centres such as Adelaide, Melbourne and Brisbane. Adelaide Diocese in particular was a significant opponent in the early 1980s. Anglo-Catholic opposition is based on very different views to those of conservative Evangelicals. It maintains that Jesus deliberately established a male-only priesthood by his selection of 12 male apostles. This means that the Christian church

is committed to maintaining a male-only priesthood. Further, the priest at the altar specifically represents Christ, and as the historical Jesus was male, then so too must be the priest who represents him. (A response to these arguments is that Jesus did not choose his apostles to be priests or bishops; that he chose a woman, Mary Magdalene, to proclaim his resurrection; and that while Jesus was certainly a man, he was also a bearded Jewish man. Does that imply that only bearded Jewish men can be priests?)

Further, traditionalists argue that the Anglican Church is not free to make this change to tradition, given that it is a tradition shared by the main Christian churches, the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox. Such a change would need to be approved by a universal council of these churches. Traditionalists who long to see the Anglican Church totally reunited with the Church of Rome, believe that any movement towards women clergy would ruin that prospect.

The traditionalist view leads to claims that women clergy ‘infect the sacramental bloodstream’, to quote one former Anglo-Catholic bishop in Australia. This supposed contamination extends to the male bishops who ordain them. Once they have ordained women, bishops are regarded in some quarters as defiled; this defilement is passed on to any man they ordain. Even being ordained alongside a woman is regarded by some as a form of pollution. Any sacrament celebrated by a woman priest or bishop is invalid, fundamentally because of the belief that women are incapable of receiving ordination.

A change of mind

Between 1986 and 1992, quite rapidly, the Anglo-Catholic opposition within major centres such as Adelaide, Brisbane and Melbourne retreated into tiny traditionalist enclaves, as most clergy and laity came to support the change. In particular, the ministry of women deacons had helped overcome the fears of many. Where women deacons were ordained in significant numbers and given as much authority as legally possible, as happened in larger dioceses, their example of effective, faithful ministry became the overriding catalyst for the next stage. From 1986 on, women deacons took on a range of ministries. Some, who had already worked as parish lay assistants, were placed in charge of parishes, with male clergy rostered to preside at the Sunday Eucharist. The new deacons, most of whom had waited patiently and prayerfully for a long time, were competent, gracious, and highly effective preachers and pastors. It soon became clear to their parishioners, clergy colleagues and the laity in general that these women were indeed called into ministry by God. Their exclusion from priestly ministry was quickly regarded as untenable. Their presence, robed as clergy, in church sanctuaries had changed the imagination, so that their very presence rapidly diffused the debate where long years of academic discussion had failed. So synods in dioceses where women deacons ministered in significant numbers became overwhelmingly supportive of the introduction of women priests. Some clergy who had been strongly and vocally opposed to women priests also made this journey as they experienced the ministry of women priests. For example, Bishop Graham Walden, Bishop of The Murray from 1989-2001, now ministers in his retirement as an associate priest in the Dubbo (NSW) parish, side-by-side with two women priests. The late Revd Dr Harry Smythe, a well-known Australian Anglo-Catholic priest, changed his mind about women priests while a worshipper at Canterbury Cathedral. His change of mind apparently coincided with the arrival on the cathedral ministry team of a woman priest, Canon Clare Edwards, in 2004.

