

Editorial

Now that the dust has started to settle after the acrimonious debates concerning the ordination of women to the priesthood, it is time for Evangelicals to take stock of their position and try to assess what the way ahead might be. The first thing which must be acknowledged is that Evangelicals have been sorely divided on this subject. Many have inclined to the view that women should be ordained to exactly the same ministry as men, either from genuine conviction or from a feeling that since things are moving that way in any case, it is better not to oppose the obvious trend. For many Evangelicals, the issue has been one of secondary importance—those who do not like it in theory are often prepared to live with it in practice, because they have more important things on their minds. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly apparent that there is a large body of influential Evangelicals who are no more prepared to accept the new order of things than Anglo-Catholics are, and the question of what they do next has become a matter of the utmost urgency.

Practically speaking, it seems that the only real way forward for dissenters in the future Church of England will be to seek some form of alternative episcopal oversight, and this is what the House of Bishops is apparently prepared to offer—at least in the short term. The possibility that a bishop might be called to undertake episcopal duties in other dioceses on a regular basis is bound to be unattractive to most people, because of the chaos which would ensue. Quite apart from anything else, arrangements of this kind would have to be changed every time a new bishop was appointed, and a balance between bishops who ordain women and those who do not would have to be struck. Would this mean that particularly dioceses would for ever be associated with one or other of these positions? That would certainly reduce the administrative problem, but it would lead to inequities of other kinds which could not be so easily resolved. The very unlikelihood of that prospect makes most people cautious: the Bishops' proposals have an air of built-in obsolescence about them, which will probably become all too apparent twenty years down the road.

A more permanent option would be that of a 'third province', overlapping with both Canterbury and York, and presumably containing a diocesan structure of its own. The most obvious area of difficulty here would be in the dioceses of Europe on the one hand, and Sodor and Man on the other. In neither of these (admittedly not very typical) cases would the duplication involved in creating a third province be very easy to apply. In the rest of the country it would probably work fairly well, though it would spell the end of the parish system as we now know it. Presumably every existing diocese would end up with large holes in it, and it would be a great temptation for prosperous parishes to leave the existing structure

and join a third province, where administration might be less onerous and the quota correspondingly lower! The problem of moving from one system to the other would also arise. Could the church accept that large areas of Cornwall or Northumberland, for example, would leave the present dioceses of Truro or Newcastle for ever? Who would decide to which system an individual parish would belong—the incumbent, the P.C.C. or the members on the electoral roll? And what would happen in the event of serious disagreement between any of these groups?

The problem would become much worse when it came to deciding the fate of cathedrals and other institutions which are now common to the Church at large. Would theological colleges be expected to train people for both types of ministry, or would special colleges be set up (or allocated) for the dissenters? This is not as simple an issue as it might seem, because anyone opposed to the priestly ministry of women would not want to be exposed to it in the course of training. And how far could the dissenting 'third province' accept the ordination and ministry of clergy and bishops in the existing provinces? The Bishops have already made it clear that clergy who refuse to accept the priesthood of women will have to accept bishops who disagree with them, and one could imagine how a 'third province' could easily fall prey to sectarianism within the Church. Organizations common to the whole Church would also be exposed to divisions of a new and curious kind, though this may well happen anyway. Would missionary societies, for example, who depend on a broad base of financial support, have to choose sides? Patronage bodies would presumably have to opt one way or the other, but the parishes they appoint to might not follow their lead. And so on.

The issue of women's ministry can be resolved in this sort of way in an essentially non-territorial church, but it strikes at the very fabric of the Church of England's organization. Too many of the existing structures would have to change first before a solution of this kind could be adopted. In itself, this might not be a bad thing, and perhaps the current crisis has been sent to us to make us think again about our traditional way of doing things. But thinking about it is one thing, and taking action to effect the necessary changes is quite another. The effort involved in such an upheaval is probably too great for Parliament to contemplate, since it would require a complete reorganization of the existing structure of Church government. Not even the Reformation achieved that!

However strongly people may feel about the need to do something to accommodate the different views within the Church on this issue, finding and applying a just solution will not be easy. On the other hand, failing to find a way ahead in this matter might in the end prove to be even more difficult. There would certainly be accusations of discrimination levelled on both sides, probably with considerable justification. Anyone who felt strongly about the issue would be most unlikely to tolerate the opposite viewpoint, especially if it meant having to work together in close proxim-

ity to one another. Two men might just about manage it, but an ordained woman would divide any such team immediately, and how could ordained women be kept out without charges of unfairness being made?

Ultimately, it seems that Evangelicals will have to be prepared for massive changes in the days ahead if the kind of Church they want to see is going to take shape. A primary task will be to work out an acceptable form of women's ministry, different from the present presbyterate, but complementary to it. Failure in this area is a major weakness of both Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic wings of the church at the present time. Faced with a choice of all or nothing, many opt for the ordination of women because they fear that the alternative will deprive the Church of a legitimate ministerial resource. This would be a tragedy, and those who wish to exclude women from the present presbyterate must surely find a way of satisfying the calling of some women into licensed ministry. Putting them on a lower level and keeping them there is just not good enough—the whole hierarchical structure of the Church will have to change if this is to succeed!

Finding an acceptable ministry for women also means defining the proper rôle of men, and this may turn out to be even harder. There is little point in having two types of ministry, if each does almost everything the other does as well. But what activities should be the exclusive domain of male clergy? 'Headship' is fine in theory, but what does it mean in practice? Does it imply that no woman should sit on a P.C.C. or be a member of a pastoral team? Or does it mean that such bodies should always be presided over by a man? In the latter case, should that man have a veto over decisions taken by a majority of women, and if not, why is it important that a male be put in the chair? Here is a real agenda which Evangelicals will have to address if they are serious about male/female differences in ministry, and it may well turn out that certain aspects of currently accepted practice will have to be reformed. This may be the hardest part of all—it is one thing to refuse something new, but quite another to change the habits of a lifetime! The important thing to remember in all of this, of course, is that there can be no piecemeal solutions. Whatever is decided in the end, it must be coherent and workable—based on Scriptural teaching and clearly geared to applicability in the current ecclesiastical climate. This is a great challenge to us all, and points the way to some interesting days ahead!

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