

THE BISHOP'S PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Manchester Diocesan Synod – June 2010

This summer's General Synod has the potential to be one of the most challenging meetings, procedurally and in every other way, for more than twenty years. So I thought it would be appropriate this evening for me to reflect for a moment on what is at stake – in relation to the proposals for the ordination of women to the episcopate.

There is still a long way to go before the mind of the Church of England will finally have been established on this issue. It is three and a half years since I chaired the first meeting of the Legislative Drafting Group – which came to be known as the Manchester Group. It met eighteen times. Since that group completed its task, the Steering Committee, which I have also chaired over the past twelve months, has met on eighteen occasions. We have a further meeting at the start of next month. The Revision Committee, chaired by the Archdeacon of Rochester, has met on sixteen occasions in order to produce its 142-page report; and, as a member and chair of the Steering Committee, I have attended all their meetings too. On each occasion, we have met in London; and on almost every occasion the meetings have lasted seven hours.

So, for me and also for Geoffrey Tattersall on the Steering Committee and for Simon Killwick on the Revision Committee: lots of meetings, lots of pieces of paper and seemingly endless discussion. I sometimes ask myself: if I had known then what I know now, would I have agreed to take the task on, back in 2006? The answer is: yes – because it has been a privilege to have been involved in something so difficult, so complex and important for the future life and witness for the Church of England and its mission under God. A question which I would have to struggle to answer with the same clarity, however, is whether I am more encouraged or discouraged now than when we started out.

It has never been a secret that I am a supporter of the ordained ministry of women and of their admission to the episcopate. I want to avoid any notion that women who become bishops will in any way be perceived as second-class bishops.

But I also want there to be an honoured place within the Church of England for those who, for varying theological reasons, are unable to receive the priestly or episcopal ministry of women. I say that both as a matter of personal conviction, and because this diocese contains a significant number of parishes that have passed the

current Resolutions A and B, and have petitioned under the Act of Synod Resolution C. Some of them are among our most vibrant churches, in terms of growing and giving, and of connecting with and serving our local communities. I want as many of their priests and laity as possible to remain part of the Church of England – and, in particular, part of this diocese of Manchester.

So my hope all along has been that it will be possible to find a way of doing what most of the House and most of the Synod want: namely, to admit women to the episcopate in a way that keeps to a minimum the number of departures from the Church of England. All along, I have travelled in hope and I continue to do so.

At an earlier stage I had thought that an approach that conferred some measure of jurisdiction on bishops with responsibility for looking after “petitioning” parishes might provide a way through. That was something we looked at very hard within the Revision Committee. But transfer was not an approach that had commanded a majority in the House of Bishops or the General Synod at an earlier stage; and after much discussion it was also rejected by the Revision Committee. Opposition to the idea in some key quarters seems to have hardened as the process has gone on.

I suspect that transfer amendments will once again be at the storm-centre of the debates in July. It will be for Synod to make up its mind. But it has become clear that the Steering Committee, is likely to oppose such amendments – on the grounds that, as the Report of the Revision Committee indicates, hours of time have been spent carefully debating each possibility; and the only proposal that has commanded a majority is the one that the Revision Committee’s report presents. My assessment is that those who will want to argue for transfer will have an uphill task persuading Synod differently.

So we now need to take seriously the possibility that the legislation, as currently proposed, may come to diocesan synods for approval; and then eventually go back to the House of Bishops and then the General Synod for final approval - based on delegation under a Statutory Code of Practice (which is legally stronger than the present Act of Synod).

That inevitably increases the risks of more departures than I had wanted or expected. Whether or not there will be something the House of Bishops could do, especially in relation to the issue sacramental assurance (and headship), by being generous in the way that it drafts the Code of Practice, will no doubt be rigorously explored by its members. That could perhaps turn out to be helpful to a few traditionalist Catholics and conservative evangelicals, but

not, I suspect, to many. Nevertheless, there will be bishops, clergy and laity who will try do what they can to help at least some, who might otherwise leave, remain within the Church of England, despite what traditionalist Catholics and conservative evangelicals would see as an unsatisfactory outcome on jurisdiction.

Even so, it would be a more fragile basis for proceeding than I, personally, would have wished. And there will certainly be those – not least within this diocese – for whom the notion of delegation from a female diocesan bishop is a bridge too far. So, to answer my own earlier question more directly, I am not discouraged and I continue to travel in hope – but, frankly, with a good deal of apprehension.

Not surprisingly, there are some people (among them the outgoing Bishop of Durham) who believe that the dilemmas might get easier if we postpone or abandon the legislative process. I do not believe that would be the case. It seems clear to me that the underlying differences of view on women bishops are very deeply held; and that, whatever shifts there may be in synodical arithmetic after this year's elections, the underlying dynamics are unlikely to change fundamentally. Furthermore, the impact on the morale and mission of the Church of England of several more years of argument would be very bad. So, for all my apprehension, I am clear that we need to see this journey through to the end, without building in further delay.

Since the Revision Committee ceased its work, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York have announced their intention to propose amendments at the July General Synod to enable a climate within which mutual trust and common flourishing across the Church of England can be nourished.

The Steering Committee, whose duty at this stage is simply to protect the Revision Committee's present proposals and steer them through the synodical process, has not yet seen these or any other amendments – and so is unable to decide how, in accordance with its particular brief, it will respond. But, as I have already indicated, it is likely that the Committee's majority view will be to resist them.

But in the end, as I have written recently in *Crux*, and have said elsewhere several times, we have to decide what kind of Church of England we want to be; and it is important that all diocesan synods are given the opportunity by General Synod to engage in that debate.

Finally, I want to commend to this synod the excellent and prayerful

work that has gone on in recent years between our Women's Chapter, Forward in Faith, the Conservative Evangelicals, and others. There have been some most moving vigils and eucharists which have helped enormously, by the grace of God, to build bridges between clergy and laity who, though of different persuasions on this matter, are each, without exception, important parts of the one body of this diocese.

May God grant us the continuing grace and strength to remain as one in a church in which women truly are bishops.