

THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN TO THE PRIESTHOOD AND EPISCOPATE: WHERE ARE WE?

And they took hold of Paul, and brought him unto the Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new teaching is, which is spoken by thee? For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. (Now all the Athenians and the strangers sojourning there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing.) Acts 17:20-22 ASV

We sit at the beginning of the third millennium. It is a time of new things. The world around us is changing in myriad ways. Like it or not, it is a new age, a time of innovation and reinvention. As an example, in this new age we are supposed to embrace a new way of referring to the present time. Use of the term A.D. (“*in the year of our Lord*”) is discouraged; instead, C.E. (meaning “*the Common Era*”) is the new preferred way of speaking of the present age. Culturally and socially we are more and more in an environment that cares nothing for the things of the Church Catholic. In a time of new things, the Episcopal Church has embraced a number of “new things” of her own, not the least of which is the admittance of women into the ranks of the ordained ministry, specifically to the priesthood and episcopate.

How new is it, and how did we get here? In the early church there did appear to be an order of women ministers set apart for servant ministry in the Church, primarily for the purpose of ministering to women. Over time, along with the orders of virgins and widows (fourth century), the order of deaconesses disappeared (10th century in the West, 12th in the East). It was not until the mid-1800s that the restoration of the order of deaconesses was seen in the Anglican Communion.

In 1944, Bishop R.O. Hall of Hong Kong laid hands on a woman named Florence Li Tim-Oi, intending to ordain her to the sacred priesthood. The rest of the Anglican Communion reacted negatively to the news. As a result, Li Tim-Oi agreed not to function as a priest, in order to protect Bishop Hall from censure. Four years later the 1948 Lambeth Conference of the Bishops of the Communion responded negatively to the request of the Province of China for permission to experiment with the ordination of women to the priesthood for a period of 20 years. The Conference offered that “such an experiment would be against the tradition and order and would gravely affect the internal and external relations of the Anglican Communion” (1948, Resolution 113).

With the exception of the actions of Bishop Hall of Hong Kong, the subject appears to have been seen as one that would be acted upon by the Communion as a whole. The 1968 Lambeth Conference, taking up the matter, “affirm[ed] its opinion that the theological arguments as at present presented for and against the ordination of women to the priesthood are inconclusive” (1968, Resolution 34). Resolution 35 of the same Conference requested that careful study be made throughout the Communion. Resolution 37 requested that the Anglican Consultative Council consult with other churches that were ordaining women at the time. Resolution 38 recommended that “before any national or regional Church or province makes a final decision to ordain women to the priesthood, the advice of the Anglican Consultative Council (or Lambeth Consultative Body) be sought and carefully considered.”

In 1971 the Anglican Consultative Council was formed. At its first meeting a request was made by the Diocese of Hong Kong concerning its desire to begin ordaining women to the priesthood. The Council chose narrowly not to stand in the way of a diocese that, with the approval of its Province, chose to go ahead with the innovation. The vote was 24 to 22 in favor. The Council's resolution included that it would "use its good offices to encourage all Provinces of the Anglican Communion to continue in communion with these dioceses [deciding to ordain women to the priesthood]." It is worth noting that the matter was still considered grave enough to warrant concern over maintaining communion throughout the Communion.

As a result,

The Episcopal Women's Caucus was formed on Oct. 30, 1971, during a meeting of professional lay women and deacons. Notified that the House of Bishops had created yet another study committee on the ordination of women, without having taken action on its previous studies, the women informed the Presiding Bishop of their refusal to cooperate further and constituted themselves the EWC.

Regional organizing conferences were held in 1972, and EWC chapters were created in many parts of the country. Following the ordinations in Philadelphia and Washington in 1974 and 1975, a special conference was called to develop strategies for the 1976 General Convention. These strategies contributed to the action of the 1976 Convention making the ordination canon equally applicable to women and men. [From the EWC website: www.ecusa.anglican.org/ecw/ewc.our_story.htm]

Lawlessness

On July 29, 1974, 11 women deacons participated in a priesthood ordination service at the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia. Two retired and one resigned bishop performed the service. The reaction was immediate. Their bishops inhibited some of the women from priestly functions, and some from deacon's service; others of the women agreed voluntarily to refrain from priestly ministry. Presiding Bishop John Allin called an emergency meeting of the House of Bishops in Chicago on Aug. 15 (ironically, the Feast of the Virgin Mary). At that meeting, the ordaining bishops were criticized for their "violation of collegiality." The House asserted that the ordinations were not valid. The Philadelphia 11 (as the women came to be called) rejected the bishops' action. The Vice President of House of Deputies, Charles Willie, resigned in protest. Ecclesiastical charges were filed against the Philadelphia bishops but were later turned away by a Board of Inquiry, saying that doctrinal issues needed to be resolved first. Some of the Philadelphia 11 continued to seek attention by traveling about and celebrating the Eucharist at various locations.

In September 1975 four more women deacons were illegally ordained to the priesthood by a retired bishop in Washington D.C. Shortly after that the House of Bishops censured all the bishops who participated in the illegal ordinations.

While this was going on in America, Pope Paul VI and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Donald Coggan, corresponded over the issue. Pope Paul wrote:

Your Grace is of course well aware of the Catholic Church's position on this question. She holds that **it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood**, for very fundamental reasons. These reasons include: the example recorded in the Sacred Scriptures of Christ choosing his Apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his Church.

The Joint Commission between the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church, which has been at work since 1966, is charged with presenting in due time a final report. **We must regretfully recognize that a new course taken by the Anglican Communion in admitting women to the ordained priesthood cannot fail to introduce into this dialogue an element of grave difficulty which those involved will have to take seriously into account.** [Emphasis mine]

This pronouncement was followed by a declaration from the Roman Catholic Church's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith regarding the ordination of men only. Archbishop Coggan sat on this exchange until after the General Convention.

In September 1976 General Convention approved the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate by changing the language of the ordination canons: "This canon shall be interpreted in its plain and literal sense, except that words of male gender shall also imply the female gender."

Perhaps if the Convention had been aware of the communication between Pope Paul and Archbishop Coggan the vote might have gone differently. As it was, the result of the adoption of the practice radically changed the nature of The Episcopal Church's ecumenical efforts with the Roman Catholic Church and with the Orthodox. The Polish National Catholic Church broke off communion with ECUSA over it. Prior to 1976 it was common for members of the Orthodox churches to be told by their clergy that if they found themselves in a community without an Orthodox Church they should worship with the Episcopalians. All that changed after the General Convention of 1976.

Conscience

Within two months, the Anglican Church of Canada began ordaining women to the priesthood. Within a year of the passage of the permissive interpretation of the ordination canons, the House of Bishops, meeting at Port St. Lucie, Fla., adopted a document that came to be called the "conscience clause."

It is, in actuality, a Statement on Conscience prepared by the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops and accepted by the House at their fall meeting in 1977. The statement spoke to several aspects of the situation including the legislative intent of the canon change:

(c) The meaning of a law involves not only the wording of the legislation, but also the intent of the legislation. Did General Convention intend (1) to make certain that dioceses prepared to ordain women were assured that they had the approval of the Episcopal Church in going ahead or (2) to require such action even by dioceses not yet prepared to act nor persuaded that they could rightly do so? By the nature of the case absolute proof is impossible, **but majority opinion would seem to support the first understanding.** At any rate there are adequate grounds for seeing at least sufficient doubt about the intent of the legislation, so as to inhibit insistence that women priests be accepted by all and at once.

The Statement's concluding paragraph reads:

In the light of all this and in keeping with our intention at Minneapolis, we affirm that no Bishop, Priest, Deacon, or Lay Person should be coerced or penalized in any manner, nor suffer any canonical disabilities as a result of his or her conscientious objection to or support of the 65th General Convention's action with regard to the ordination of women to the priesthood or episcopate.

In the atmosphere established by the Port St. Lucie Statement, the Episcopal Church moved forward with the innovation. Women were ordained to the priesthood by bishops who believed that it was right to do so, and those who were not so disposed were not compelled to conform. The statement was just that, a description of the Anglican position on matters of conscience particularly applied to the matter of the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate. It was not framed as a canon or even presented to General Convention as a resolution. It did not need to be. It did, however, speak to every member of the Church and not just its bishops. [See sec. 3 of the statement]

The state of affairs resulting from the accommodation described by the Port St. Lucie Statement turned out to be the eventual position reached by the entire Communion a decade later. The 1988 Lambeth Conference, faced with the imminent possibility of a woman being consecrated a bishop, established what came to be known as the "Eames Commission," (named for its chairman, the Archbishop of Armagh, the Most Rev. Robin Eames). The Eames Commission set about to encourage the various Provinces of the Communion to maintain the highest level of Communion possible, given disagreement over the practice of the ordination of women.

The Eames Commission described the situation within the Communion as a process of "Open Reception." Not only had the introduction of this innovation radically hampered our ecumenical efforts [Paul VI correspondence], the Anglican Communion was faced with coming to terms with the notion of "impaired communion" within the Communion itself. It must be admitted that the introduction of the practice of the ordination of women has fractured the Anglican Communion.

The Eames Commission also upheld what the Port St. Lucie Statement had described:

Respect for the positions of those who are in favour and those who remain opposed has to be maintained within dioceses and Provinces, even after a decision is taken to consecrate women. In the continuing and dynamic process of reception, freedom and space must be available until consensus of opinion one way or the other has been achieved. Bishops and dioceses who accept and endorse the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate would need to recognise that, within a genuinely open process of reception, there must be room for those who disagree. [Source: www.lambethconference.org/reports/report10.html, ¶41.]

In 1986 the Anglican Church of Canada, despite the Eames' Commission's work, rescinded its "conscience" provision and required acceptance in all its dioceses of women priests.

The first elections of women as bishops occurred in 1989. First, Barbara Harris was made Suffragan Bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts, and then Penelope Jamieson was made a Diocesan Bishop in New Zealand in early 1990. As things have played out, we now have bishops in office in parts of the Communion who are not recognized as such throughout the Communion.

In 1994 the Church of England (C. of E.) made provision for the ordination of women but in doing so institutionalized a system for respecting the consciences of all involved. Individual parishes are able to decide whether or not they will accept the ordination of women and are guaranteed episcopal oversight in keeping with that decision. As of this writing, there are no female bishops in the Church of England, but women do function as priests in every diocese in the C. of E.

In 1996 the House of Bishops of ECUSA took a straw vote on the interpretation of the ordination canons and discovered that a majority of them believed the canons should mandate full acceptance of women in Holy Orders. The General Convention of 1997 meeting in Philadelphia saw the amendment of Canon III.8.1, saying, "the provisions of the canons of the General Convention, insofar as they may relate to the ordination of women and the licensing and deployment of women clergy, are mandatory." At that time there were four diocesan bishops who said they could not comply out of conscience. Currently there are three diocesan bishops who have said they cannot in good conscience license or ordain women in Holy Orders to function in their respective dioceses.

In its resolution AO45, the General Convention of 2000 directed "the Executive Council [to] establish a Task Force by January 1, 2001 to visit, interview, assess and assist the people and the Commissions on Ministry, Standing Committees and Bishops of the three dioceses in the development and implementation of an action plan for full compliance with the canon by September 1, 2002."

In the fall of 2001 teams from the AO45 Task Force visited those dioceses with the cooperation of the three diocesan bishops. In March 2002, the team consisting of the Co-Chairs of the Task Force made a follow-up visit to the Diocese of Fort Worth over the objections of the Standing Committee and the Ordinary, the Rt. Rev. Jack L. Iker. One purpose of the visit was to

meet with those members of the diocese who might be in disagreement with the leadership of the diocese. The Standing Committee, though not invited, attended the meeting in the interest of hearing from all involved and representing the interests of the Bishop, who was unable to attend.

Conclusion

Where are we now? In the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus prayed we might be one as he and the Father are one. He prayed that that unity would demonstrate to the world that the Father had sent him (John 17:20 ff.). In the face of our Lord's high priestly prayer, ecumenically, our embrace of the "new thing" of women in the priesthood and episcopate has gravely hampered our conversations with the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox churches. Our great ecumenical achievement (so called) has been an agreement of full intercommunion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America that required our suspension of the preface to the Ordinal in the Book of Common Prayer. The Preface stated our intention to continue the three distinct orders of ordained ministers characteristic of Christ's holy catholic Church. We have set that aside in the name of ecumenical progress. In doing so we have again parted ways with the rest of the Communion.

The energy and effort expended in the life of the Episcopal Church and throughout the Anglican Communion to "maintain the highest degree of Communion possible" given disagreement over the issue has also been very costly. Many have left the fellowship of ECUSA for Rome or Orthodoxy. Since 1976, because of women's ordination and other innovations, there has also been a substantial movement of people into what are termed the "Continuing Churches." Throughout the Episcopal Church there is still significant disagreement over the issue even though most dioceses ordain women. There are still clergy and parishes in the Anglican Church of Canada that cannot in conscience recognize the ordination of women. This past year has seen a flurry of lawsuits between parishes and dioceses and clergy over issues related to the ordination of women. The Diocese of Washington alone has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in pursuing a lawsuit against a priest primarily because of his inability to recognize the Acting Bishop because she is a woman. Twenty-six years of living with the "new thing" has not brought peace and harmony to the life of the Church, or numerical growth.¹

The presence of bishops and priests in the Communion who are not recognized as such throughout the Communion, while indeed a "new thing," cannot be considered a good thing. We have done violence to our understanding of conscience and its dictates. We have moved in ECUSA from permissiveness to coercion. The fruit of the introduction of the ordination of women has been further division. Ironically, in "division" and "diabolic" the root meaning is the same. The work of the Holy Spirit has always been to unite and build up.

The Very Rev. Christopher T. Cantrell, SSC

¹Total ECUSA membership in 1980 was 3,037,420; in 1995 it was 2,412,170; and in 2000 membership had fallen to 2,333,624. Source: The Lee Clark Church Reporting Company.