

6 Sept 2010 - Answer to a question on women bishops

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Last week I sent a mailing to all 400 lay members of Deanery Synods of the Diocese of Guildford, who make up the electorate for the four lay General Synod representatives. I sent in printed form the information from this website and invited people to contact me if they had any comments and questions.

I have been receiving a steady stream of correspondence. One email exchange I had yesterday I reproduce below because it may be of interest to others as to what my views are on this subject:

Question received:

“Do I correctly understand (from your paragraphs on Women Bishops) that, if you are faced with a choice between the unity of the Church and the abolition of discrimination against women in the Church, you will choose the former?”

My reply:

“Thank you for getting in contact. Your question is clear and straightforward, but, it is one of those questions where if one disagrees with the terms in which is put one cannot give a 'yes' or 'no' answer.

To take a recent example, when the Episcopal Church in the US ordained a practising gay man to the episcopate, many Anglican Churches in Africa and elsewhere said that the US Church had gone against the Bible and they must therefore be expelled from the Anglican Communion. The Archbishop of Canterbury has been trying to resist such calls and to hold both sides together, encouraging dialogue and for each side to have a greater understanding of the other side. However, those who want to expel the US Church from the Anglican Communion use the argument, 'doing what is right is more important than Church unity, so the US Church must be expelled'.

The Archbishop has been struggling to put the case that it is not as simple as that.

I cannot call to mind the arguments that the Archbishop has been using, but if the Church is the body of Christ, it shouldn't be a case of a decision between either "doing what is right" or "Church unity". Ultimately it may be, for example, in Nazi Germany, the 'Confessing Church' split off from the 'German Christian' Church because they opposed Nazi policy. However, Church history is littered with examples where the Church has split on so many different occasions and new denominations have been formed, when, in hindsight it would have been better if the Church had held together.

Whilst on some things the Bible expects us to have certainty (e.g. Hebrews 11:1), God also reminds us of how little we really know (e.g. Job 38), and over the ordination of women, each side should have the humility to accept that it is possible that their own view may be wrong.

You describe a possible decision not to ordain women to the episcopate as "discrimination against women in the Church". Others would describe their opposition to the ordination of women as "obeying the Bible." Both descriptions describe the same thing and I don't think either label is a helpful shorthand. The issue must be more complicated than that if sincere Christians take opposing views on the issue.

The Church of England, in typical compromise style (but on this occasion I believe with some merit), has ordained women to the priesthood whilst at the same time stating that those who, in conscience, disagree with the decision are "loyal Anglicans" and the CofE is officially in a process of "reception" until there is a consensus in the universal Church.

The General Synod has passed resolutions that legislation should be introduced to permit the ordination of women to the episcopate, but it has also passed resolutions that those who disagree with this decision should have provisions made for them that will enable them in conscience to remain within the CofE.

At the July meeting of the General Synod, the two Archbishops proposed an amendment to the draft legislation that they felt would have enabled those opposed to remain within the CofE, by providing "coordinate jurisdiction". In short, parishes opposed to the ordination of women to the episcopate, who were in a diocese where a woman was the diocesan bishop could be under the joint authority of that bishop and a male bishop.

The voting on the Archbishops' amendment was:
Bishops: 25 for, 15 against.
Clergy: 85 for, 90 against, 5 abstentions.
Laity: 106 in favour, 86 against, 4 abstentions.

Although 216 voted in favour and 191 voted against, it needed a majority of each 'House' to pass and because it was lost in the House of Clergy, the amendment was lost and it was not introduced.

When the legislation comes to be debated in Diocesan Synods (which is the next stage) my preference would be for the Guildford Diocesan Synod to propose a 'following motion' which asks the General Synod to insert the Archbishops' amendment into the legislation when it goes back to General Synod.

Your question is an important one, and it is possible that other Deanery Synod members would want to be aware of my answer before casting their vote. I therefore intend to put it on my website, quoting your question but not your name, because you did not ask me it expecting it to be circulated."