

# Women bishops - why is this such a divisive issue?

On 20 March 2011 I gave a talk followed by discussion on this subject at my Church. I supplied a 6 page handout setting out:

- The history of the progress of the legislation to introduce the ordination of women as bishops.
- The arguments for and against the ordination of women as bishops.
- The next steps for the Church of England in terms of the draft legislation.

Below is a copy of the hand-out.

Parish of Wisley with Pyrford Debate. 20 March 2011.  
Adrian Vincent. [www.adrianvincent.org.uk](http://www.adrianvincent.org.uk)  
**Women bishops – Why is this such a divisive issue?**

**History** [see: [www.churchofengland.org/our-views/women-bishops.aspx](http://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/women-bishops.aspx)]

**1986:** General Synod voted to allow women to become deacons.

November **1992:** General Synod passes a measure to permit the ordination of women to the priesthood. Clause 1 of the measure said “Nothing in this Measure shall make it lawful for a woman to be consecrated to the office of bishop.”

The legislation included provision for parishes opposed to the ordination of women, who could pass resolutions. Resolution A: ‘That this PCC would not accept a woman as the minister who presides at or celebrates the Holy Communion or pronounces the absolution in the parish’.

Resolution B: ‘That this PCC would not accept a woman as the incumbent or priest-in-charge of the benefice or as a team vicar of the benefice.’

**1993** General Synod passed the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod, which would allow a PCC to apply to their diocesan bishop for extended episcopal care by a bishop who does not ordain women to the priesthood (often called ‘Resolution C’).

The decision to ordain women was said to be offered to the judgement of the universal Church in an ‘open process of reception’.<sup>1</sup>

The measure was then passed by Parliament.

March **1994** the first women priests were ordained.

July **2006** the General Synod passed the motion:

“...admitting women to the episcopate in the Church of England is consonant with the faith of the Church as the Church of England has received it and would be a proper development in proclaiming afresh in this generation the grace and truth of Christ.’  
That this Synod, endorsing Resolution 111.2 of the Lambeth Conference 1998 “that those who dissent from, as well as those who assent to the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate are both loyal Anglicans” ...”

... (i) preparing the draft measure and amending canon necessary to remove the legal obstacles to the consecration of women to the office of bishop;  
(ii) preparing a draft of possible additional legal provision consistent with Canon A4 to establish arrangements that would seek to maintain the highest possible degree of communion with those conscientiously unable to receive the ministry of women bishops;...”

July **2008**, General Synod passed the motion, that the Synod:

“(a) affirm that the wish of its majority is for women to be admitted to the episcopate;  
(b) affirm its view that special arrangements be available, within the existing structures of the Church of England, for those who as a matter of theological conviction will not be able to receive the ministry of women as bishops or priests;  
(c) affirm that these should be contained in a statutory national code of practice to which all concerned would be required to have regard...”

September **2010**, draft legislation was referred to the dioceses for debate and vote. If a majority of Diocesan Synods approve the draft legislation, it will return to the General Synod (probably in February 2012) for Final Drafting. The Final Approval stage, at which two-thirds majorities are required in each House, could be reached in July 2012.

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<sup>1</sup> See pages 102-113 of “*Women Bishops in the Church of England?*” Church House Publishing 2004.

## Further reading on women bishops

1.) *“Women Bishops in the Church of England?: A report of the House of Bishops’ Working Party on Women in the Episcopate”* Church House Publishing, 2004,  
ISBN 0 7151 4037 X <http://www.churchofengland.org/media/38523/gs1557.pdf>

This is the official Church of England report (289 pages), which sets out all the arguments for and against. It is sometimes called ‘The Rochester Report’ after the Bishop of Rochester who chaired the working party that wrote it.

2.) *“Consecrated Women”* edited by Jonathan Baker, Canterbury Press, 2004,  
ISBN 1 85311 509 6

This is the main report (291 pages) from traditionalist group Forward in Faith. It argues against having women bishops and calls for a Third/New Province for those opposed if women are made bishops and sets out draft legislation of what such a Province would look like.

3.) *“Women Bishops?”* John Pitchford, Tufton Books, 2008. ISBN 978 0 85191 323 0

An easy read booklet of 42 pages setting out the traditionalist arguments against the ordination of women to the episcopate – handy for those who don’t have time to read *Consecrated Women*. Available from [www.additionalcurates.co.uk/churchunion5.html](http://www.additionalcurates.co.uk/churchunion5.html)

4.) *“The Call for Women Bishops”* edited by Harriet Harris and Jane Shaw, SPCK, 2004.  
ISBN 0281 05621 8

This is the main report (196 pages) of essays putting the case in favour, mainly from members of Women and the Church (WATCH). It argues for having women bishops with no formal provisions for those opposed.

5.) *“Women as Bishops”* edited by James Rigney, Mowbray, 2008.  
ISBN 978 0 567 03224 9

This is the main report (200 pages) of essays from the group Affirming Catholicism, in favour of the ordination of women. (It was previously published in 2006 under the title “Women and the Episcopate: Affirming Catholicism – the Journal”).

6.) *“Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism: Biblical Responses to the Key Questions”* Wayne Grudem, Multnomah Publishers, 2006. ISBN 1 59052 518 3

This sets out the conservative evangelical position. The back cover states, “Wayne Grudem offers more than forty biblical responses...showing God’s equal value in men and women and why their roles are complementary, not interchangeable.” (314 pages).

Books 1, 2, 4 and 5 are available from Church House Bookshop, 31 Great Smith Street,  
London SW1P 3BN, Tel. 020 7799 4064 [www.chbookshop.co.uk](http://www.chbookshop.co.uk)

## Women Bishops: some examples of the divided arguments

(In creating this table I relied heavily on pages 136-182 of *Women Bishops in the Church of England?*)

<b>Liberal / Affirming Catholic / Mainstream Evangelical</b>	<b>Conservative Evangelical</b>	<b>Anglo Catholic</b>
<p>The Church needs to be led by the Holy Spirit. The Bible doesn't openly condemn slavery, but over time the Spirit showed the Church it is wrong. In the same way the Spirit has shown us that withholding ordained ministry from women is wrong.</p>	<p>Scripture is the Word of God and its authority is supreme. Whilst women have an important ministry in the Church, female headship goes against the Bible.</p>	<p>It is wrong to change the Church's tradition to respond to the beliefs of contemporary society. For 2,000 years the Church followed Jesus' example of 12 male apostles, and we have no authority to change it.</p>
<p>The ordination of women is supported by scripture. E.g.: Galatians 3:28; John 20:18; Romans 16:1 &amp; 7; Philippians 4:3.</p>	<p>Gal 3:28 is about our unity in baptism. It is not about the ordained ministry. Romans 16:1 Phoebe was a deacon. The ordination of women to the diaconate is OK (deacons aren't priests and don't have headship). John 20:18 &amp; Rom 16:7 Mary Magdalene and Junia were only 'apostles' in the meaning of evangelists, not in the meaning of that order of ministry. This is shown by Acts 1:15-26, Judas was replaced by Matthias, restoring the number of apostles to twelve. Bishops are to be the successors of those apostles and therefore must be male.</p>	
<p>The headship passages are specific to some particular church situations Paul was writing to (e.g. 1 Corinthians 14:34 cannot be a blanket ban on women speaking in church, because in 11:5 he accepts women prophesying). Jesus only chose 12 male apostles because women apostles would not have been accepted in those days.</p>	<p>Scripture says there should only be male headship in the Church: 1 Corinthians 11.12-16, 14.34-38, 1 Timothy 2.11-15, Ephesians 5.21.</p>	<p>Jesus chose 12 male apostles and this was followed by the early Church. Jesus could have chosen women apostles as there are many examples where Jesus ignored the cultural norms of his day (and in any case, pagan priestesses were common, so the bound by culture argument doesn't hold water anyway).</p>
<p>Men and women were created with equal roles: Genesis 1:27. The ruling of man over woman in Genesis 3:16 was the punishment of the Fall. The work of Christ restores us to a new creation, and the original equality of Genesis 1 &amp; 2.</p>	<p>In Genesis 2 Adam had headship over Eve. The fall comes in Genesis 3 when Adam refuses to accept responsibility and headship (when he becomes subordinate to Eve in accepting the apple from her). We need to restore the biblical headship of Genesis 2, where men and women are equal in status, but have different roles. For example, the three persons of the Trinity are equal, Jesus submits to the Father but this doesn't mean that Jesus is inferior.</p>	
<p>The Queen is Head of the Church of England and she's a woman so women bishops</p>	<p>The Queen is advised by her ministers, she is not head of the Church in the sense of</p>	<p>The Queen is a lay woman. This has nothing to do with the question of whether</p>

must be OK.	being its decision maker.	women can be priests or bishops.
When God became incarnate in Jesus, he took upon himself human nature in all its fullness. The ordained ministry needs to include women to represent that fullness. Otherwise women might be seen as outside of salvation.	We don't like the idea of priests at all – they get in the way of a direct relationship between us and God. The Greek word is presbyters. Our ordained ministers are rectors / ministers etc, not priests.	At the altar, the priest represents Christ the bridegroom. This sacramental sign is lost when the celebrant is female.
There were women priests and bishops in the early Church (see Ute Eisen, <i>Women Office Holders in Early Christianity</i> ). And in any case, tradition should develop and not be static.	There were no women priests and bishops in the early Church, they only existed amongst heretical sects such as Marcionites, Gnostics and Montanists.	
The ordination of women to the episcopate will remove a major barrier to reunion between the Anglican and Methodist Churches.	The Church is made up of those who believe in Jesus. Denominations aren't an issue. Your denomination is just the most convenient boat for you from which to be "fishers of men".	The ordination of women to the priesthood erected a barrier to unity between the Anglican and Roman Catholic & Orthodox Churches. The ordination of women to the episcopate will be the final nail in the coffin of any chance of reunion.
The Roman Catholic Church will one day ordain women too – there are already many supporters with that Church and a new Pope might change things.	We wouldn't want to unite with the Roman Catholic Church with all their unbiblical doctrines.	The Roman Catholic Church has stated unequivocally it has no authority to ordain women. They don't do u-turns.
The ordination of women bishops will bring many new gifts into the episcopate, make the church more representative, give the church greater credibility and therefore make mission more effective.	The same was said before the ordination of women to the priesthood, but the change resulted in declining church attendance.	
The ordination of women has been proved to be God's work as can be seen by its spiritual fruit. The 'period of reception' by which the rightness of the decision was to be tested is therefore over.	We don't like the idea of 'reception'. The meaning of scripture is clear and it must be obeyed.	When the ordination of women to the priesthood was introduced it was said that we would be in a period of reception that will only be complete when the decision it is accepted by the universal Church. We were told that there were two equal 'integrities' on this issue and this has enabled us to remain

		within the CofE. To ordain women bishops and close down the period of reception would break that promise.
Women priests and bishops are truly priests and bishops and Canon A4 says this must be acknowledged by all. And even if someone did have doubts about women's orders, Article 26 of the 39 Articles says "Of the unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacraments."	We focus on God's free offer of salvation to those who believe. We are suspicious of 'sacraments' which might be unbiblical additions getting in the way of our direct relationship with Christ.	Holy Orders, by their continuity in time and faith, offer assurance of the authenticity of the sacraments they mediate. The ordination of women breaks that continuity and introduces sacramental doubt. When it comes to sacraments, we are duty bound to take the least doubtful course.
Women bishops must be bishops on the same terms as male bishops. Therefore there must be no provisions for those opposed which would put that in doubt by allowing people to reject their ministry. We must have a single united Church and not allow schism by letting those opposed form a 'church within a church' free from contact with women.	We don't like liberal male bishops and are happy to reject their ministry because of their unscriptural beliefs. In the same way, we would reject the ministry of women bishops too because it goes against the scriptural requirement of male headship.	Bishops are to be a "focus of unity". A woman bishop cannot be a focus of unity, because she will have in her dioceses some who cannot recognise her as a bishop. Women bishops will also divide the communion of bishops because there will now be bishops who are unable to be in communion with each other.
Once you have women priests you must have women bishops. Diaconate, priesthood and episcopate are three parts of a single order of ministry.	It might be OK to have a woman priest in a team ministry under the headship of a male team rector. But to have a woman bishop goes against the scripture of male headship.	Yes, once you have women priests there is no theological reason not to have women bishops. Therefore we should either reverse the decision on women priests, or introduce women bishops whilst allowing those opposed to be under a traditionalist bishop with who is not in communion with women bishops: e.g. via a new non-geographic province/dioceses; or under bishops of a new religious society.

## Next steps

The Church of England website<sup>2</sup> has the documents which explain the draft women bishops legislation that dioceses are currently considering:

“Women and the Episcopate – A background note [A8(WE)Background]”

38. Clause 1 of the [draft] Measure...:

- Permits the consecration of women as bishops and the continued ordination of women to the priesthood;
- Repeals the Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure 1993;
- Makes transitional provisions regarding Resolutions A and B under the 1993 Measure.

39. ... the Measure:

- Imposes an obligation on every diocesan bishop (irrespective of gender) to make a scheme, following consultation with the diocesan synod, containing arrangements for delegating the exercise of episcopal ministry relating to the celebration of the sacraments and pastoral care to a male bishop;
- Entitles a parish to issue a ‘Letter of Request’ to the diocesan bishop seeking the ministry of a male bishop under such arrangements;
- Entitles a parish to issue a ‘Letter of Request during a Vacancy’, asking the diocesan bishop that only a male priest be appointed as incumbent or priest in charge; and
- Requires the House of Bishops to draw up a Code of Practice, which requires the approval of the General Synod and is to give guidance on various matters arising under the Measure and to which anyone exercising functions in the Church of England must ‘have regard’.

40. At the General Synod in July 2010 amendments which would have created additional dioceses or involved transfers of jurisdiction were defeated by a wide margin.

41. The effect of amendments proposed by Archbishops would have been that male bishops ministering to parishes that had issued a letter of request would have exercised ‘co-ordinate jurisdiction’ with the diocesan bishop, that is jurisdiction conferred directly by the Measure rather than by way of delegation from the diocesan bishop. ...

42. The Archbishops’ main amendment was defeated on a vote by Houses in the House of Clergy (Bishops 25-15 in favour, Clergy 90-85 against with 5 abstentions, Laity 106-86 in favour with 4 abstentions).”

Most of those in favour of women bishops say that any provision from a male bishop for those opposed must be from a male bishop who is under the delegated authority of the woman diocesan bishop. Otherwise it would be setting up a ‘church within a church’.

Those against say that because they doubt whether a woman bishop is truly a bishop, and therefore can’t receive her sacramental ministry, then they couldn’t receive the sacramental ministry of a male bishop delegated by her either. Therefore the draft legislation on offer does not meet their needs.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/structure/general-synod/about-general-synod/references-to-dioceses.aspx>