

Women Bishops Provisions: St George's Headstone

On 18 December 2018, the Church of England published the decision of the Independent Reviewer in the Grievance from the PCC of St George's Headstone: <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/pcc-st-georges-headstone-report-independent-reviewer-sir-william-fittall>

The decision is a good snapshot into how the arrangements for traditionalist parishes under a woman diocesan bishop are working.

(I declare an interest that I know some of the people mentioned in the report: William Fittall was my boss when I worked at Church House, and I was on friendly terms with Bishops Jonathan Baker and Rod Thomas when I was on General Synod).

Sir William Fittall is the Independent Reviewer and sets out the background:

6. [...] In May 2014 the House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests set out a new procedure by which PCCs could, on grounds of theological conviction concerning the ordained ministry of women, request their diocesan bishop to make arrangements in accordance with the Declaration.

The PCC of St George's had passed a resolution under the Declaration asking the Bishop of London for ministry from a bishop who met four criteria. I set them out below, with my comments on each:

we request that episcopal sacramental and pastoral ministry in this parish be entrusted:

i. to a male bishop who stands in the historic, Apostolic, and sacramental succession of bishops so ordained,

- that is uncontroversial given that is what the House of Bishops Declaration was designed to provide.

ii. at whose consecration a male bishop who had not consecrated a woman as a bishop presided,

- saying that the bishop has to have been ordained by a male bishop is uncontroversial in that it is saying they should be in the apostolic succession. What is controversial is saying that the bishop who ordained them must not be someone who has ordained women bishops.

iii. whose marital status conforms with the Apostolic teaching and practice expressed in the historic teaching and practice of the Church of England, and

- that is controversial. It is code for saying they don't want the traditionalist Bishop of Fulham, Jonathan Baker to be appointed as the bishop for them,

because he is remarried and his former spouse is still living, and therefore they consider that he has breached the indissolubility of marriage.

iv. who ordains only men to the priesthood

- that is uncontroversial because it is saying they want a traditionalist bishop, which is the purpose of the provisions.

The request had first been dealt with by Rt Revd Richard Chartres when he was Bishop of London, and after he retired, the new Bishop of London, the Rt Revd Sarah Mullally.

Both Bishops of London made big efforts to be accommodating to the parish. Bishop Richard first provided the traditionalist Bishop Robert Ladds for the parish. Then Bishop Sarah offered either Bishop Jonathan Baker or Bishop Rod Thomas. Both bishops met the criteria of being traditionalists who for theological reasons object to the ordination of women. Nevertheless, the Parish rejected Bishop Jonathan due to his re-marriage and Bishop Rod due to his being a Conservative Evangelical.

Sir William decided - rightly in my view - that the Parish had no right to set a marriage criteria for their bishop when seeking provisions over the ordination of women:

the resolution making procedure set out in the House of Bishops' Declaration concerns theological conviction in relation only to gender and ordained ministry. It does not extend to matters or marital status or indeed any other consideration. The PCC's grievance against the decision of the Bishop of London to invite the Bishop of Fulham to provide episcopal ministry to the parish is therefore unjustified. Para 45.

Sir William also decided that the Parish couldn't require that the bishop provided for them must be someone who had been ordained by someone who doesn't ordain women. This would have excluded Bishop Rod Thomas who had been ordained by Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Archbishop also ordains women (I had the pleasure of attending Bishop Rod's ordination).

The Parish's case in Annex A of the Report was that their:

request for a bishop at whose consecration a male bishop who had not consecrated a woman as a bishop presided arises from a theology of communion. The 'less than full communion' within the Church of England, engendered by the ordination and consecration of women

and they say that this view was given legitimacy and provision by

A precedent for the continuation of the catholic episcopate consecrated by male bishops who do not consecrate women was made at the consecration of Philip North on 2nd February 2015

when he was ordained only by bishops who don't themselves ordain women as bishops.

There is some force in this argument, but I don't think it holds in this circumstance. Yes it is true that if you disagree with the ordination of women on theological grounds, and your bishop ordains women, then there is an impairment to the communion between you and your bishop. But this is not the circumstance here: they would be in full communion with Bishop Rod, because he is a bishop who does not ordain women and who is in the apostolic succession because he was ordained by a male bishop. The fact that Justin Welby also ordains women would impair the communion between the parish and Archbishop Justin, but Archbishop Justin is not the one from whom the parish would be receiving sacramental ministry.

Sir William in his decision rejecting the Parish's argument, quoted from the theological statement of The Society which is the main traditionalist body (the church wing of Forward in Faith). Sir William wrote (para 50):

This, by its nature is not an easy question to resolve definitively. Nevertheless, I note the following clear statement by the Council of Bishops of The Society under the patronage of Saint Wilfrid and Saint Hilda at paragraph 2.6 of '*Communion, Catholicity and a Catholic Life*':
'We reject any so-called "theology of taint" whereby a bishop who ordains women to the episcopate or the priesthood thereby invalidates his own orders and renders invalid the orders of those whom he subsequently ordains. Men who have been ordained to the priesthood by a male bishop who stands in the historic apostolic succession of bishops at whose episcopal ordination a male bishop presided will be welcomed as Priests of The Society, irrespective of whether the ordaining bishop also ordained women to the episcopate and/or the priesthood.'

In summary, I think that the provisions for traditionalists which were established as part of the ordination of women as bishops are working. On the few occasions where there has been a formal grievance, these have been considered carefully by the Independent Reviewer (first Sir Philip Mawer and now Sir William Fittall) and on each occasion the Reviewer has given a carefully considered, and in my view, correct decision.

Adrian Vincent. February 2019