

Review of the Synod's consideration of the Law of the Church of England Clarification Canon 1992 and the ordination of women as presbyters

(A report from the Standing Committee)

Introduction

1. At item 18.3 on the Synod business paper for Monday 16 October 2006 is a motion received by the Standing Committee from a private member of the Synod for the introduction of a bill for the General Synod – Law of the Church of England Clarification Canon 1992 Adopting Ordinance 2006.
2. At its meeting on 25 September 2006 the Standing Committee requested the Archbishop to arrange for a report to be prepared for the Synod which sets out the previous decisions of the Synod in relation to the Canon and briefly summarises the reports received by the Synod on the issue of ordination of women as presbyters.
3. This report has been prepared in response to the Standing Committee's request.
4. It should be noted that most bills for ordinances are promoted to the Synod at the request of the Standing Committee and are accompanied by an explanatory statement or report including a recommendation from the Standing Committee that the bill be passed as an ordinance. In the present case, this report is a recitation of the facts without a recommendation.

History

5. The issue of the ordination of women as presbyters has been discussed worldwide for many years, and at the Sydney Synod on a regular basis since 1977. In that year, the Synod received a report from the Diocesan Doctrine Commission on the meaning of ordination.
6. In 1983 the Synod received reports from the Diocesan Doctrine Commission and the Legal Committee and (by resolution 7/83) resolved –
“Synod does not accept the proposed amendment to the Constitution to facilitate the ordination of women to the priesthood as this Synod is not convinced that the proposal is consistent with Scripture.”
7. In 1985 rural (now area) deanery conferences were held. There were several propositions considered, and the interpretation of the results is difficult. However, according to the report in the 1986 Yearbook of the 24 deaneries, 4.5 deaneries basically supported the ordination of women as presbyters and 18.5 deaneries opposed such ordination (a tied vote is shown as 0.5).
8. In 1985 the Synod (by resolution 5/85) resolved –
“Synod supports the present practice of ordaining only male persons to the priesthood.”
9. In his Presidential Address to the Synod in 1986, Archbishop Donald Robinson referred to attempts to introduce at the General Synod legislation to provide for the ordination of women to all 3 orders of ministry. He stated -
“The introduction of this bill at once revealed the deeply divided state of opinion and conviction among Synod members, in a debate more intense and indicative of the possibility of schism within the church than any I have ever listened to.”
10. In 1986 the Synod received a report from the Diocesan Doctrine Commission. The theological considerations of that report were summarised in the Commission's subsequent report of 2000 as follows –
“In the New Testament there is a consistent theme of the principle of order in the relationship of husbands and wives. In the mutual interdependence of marriage the husband is to be the loving head of his wife.”
“The Bible connects the relationship of men and women in the family with relationships in a Christian congregation.”
“Women are not to assume the authoritative teaching office that properly belongs to men in the Christian congregation.”

“Because, as Article XX states, it is not lawful for the church to enact anything that is contrary to God’s word written, the existing practice of restricting to men admission to the priesthood as defined in our formularies is to be upheld.”

11. In 1987, Archbishop Robinson stated -

“If, as I believe, the restriction of the presbyteral role to men has its roots in this stratum of the New Testament, I hold it to be a matter of obedience to Christ that the church should adhere to it, as it has always done. I must regard the maintenance of a male presbyterate as essential for the integrity of the church, and as a non-negotiable requirement.”

He went on to say that the view was not his alone, but –

“it is practically the unvarying stance of nineteen centuries of church life. Moreover, I verily believe that the apostolic and catholic and reformed character of our Anglican Church of Australia is at stake.”

12. In 1987 the Synod (by resolution 8/87) requested a report from the Diocesan Doctrine Commission on “the character and extent of the ministry of women in the church as warranted by scripture and the relationship of such findings to the life of the Anglican Church of Australia today.”

13. In 1988, the Doctrine Commission reported -

“Our conclusion based on scripture is that a woman is not permitted to assume the office of teacher within the congregation. It is our judgment that the passing of the years has not changed the implications of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 for ministry to ordinary ‘family congregations.’”

Nevertheless they also stated –

“we believe it appropriate to appoint women as chaplains in women’s institutions, authorised to preach and preside at the Lord’s Supper.”

14. In 1987, the Synod agreed to the ordination of women to the diaconate by passing the General Synod – Ordination of Women to the Office of Deacon Canon 1985 Adopting Ordinance 1987. The first such ordinations occurred in 1989.

15. In 1991, the Synod (resolution 10/91), “recognising the tension within our church arising from disagreement over appropriate roles for women in ministry especially in regard to the ordination of women to the priesthood,” organised a public conference, which was held in 1992, with an attendance of over 370 people. Following that conference, a lengthy report was provided to the Synod in 1992, analysing both sides of the question.

16. At the General Synod in 1992, the Law of the Church of England Clarification Canon 1992 passed provisionally and was submitted to the Sydney Synod. In his Presidential Address, Archbishop Robinson stated –

“We are not dealing with matters of indifference, where plurality is tolerable. We are dealing with matters of theological truth. My own reading of the scriptures leads me to believe that the evidence is inescapable. To ordain women as priests is contrary to the teaching of the Bible.”

17. In 1992, the Sydney Synod rejected a motion that a bill to adopt the General Synod canon be read a second time by the following majority –

	Clergy	Laity	Total
Yes	77	168	245
No	148	220	368
Informal	1	1	<u>2</u>
			615

A separate motion dissenting from the General Synod canon was carried with the converse majority.

18. In 1993 the Synod passed a resolution (10/93) that there be a moratorium on the issue of the ordination of women to the priesthood until at least the 44th Synod (effectively 3 years).

19. The matter was next debated in 1996 when a bill to adopt the General Synod canon was again introduced at the Synod. On this occasion the ordinance by which the canon was to be adopted requested

4 Additional Materials

that if the canon were adopted so as to enable women to be ordained as presbyters, the Archbishop not appoint such women as rectors. The Synod again voted not to pass a motion that the bill to adopt the General Synod canon be read a second time by the following majority –

	Clergy	Laity	Total
Yes	79	200	279
No	151	210	361
Informal	1	0	<u>1</u>
			641

20. In 1997 the Synod (by resolution 16/97) resolved –

“Synod notes that in 1996 a substantial majority of Synod affirmed the Diocesan policy of not ordaining women as priests and after a second detailed debate on this issue rejected the bill for the General Synod – Law of the Church of England Clarification Canon 1992 Adopting Ordinance 1996. Synod warmly supports the Archbishop’s proposal for a conference on the future of women’s ministry in the Diocese and respectfully encourages the Archbishop-in-Council to plan a conference that will encourage and strengthen the ministries of women in our churches.”

21. A conference held in 1998 was attended by about 330 Synod members. Papers were presented, and small group discussions held. Later that year the Synod (by resolution 34/98) resolved –

“In response to the Conference on Women’s Ministry, this Synod requests that the Standing Committee bring to the 1st session of the 45th Synod such legislation as would enable a 5 year experimentation of lay and diaconal administration of the Lord’s Supper (in the presence or absence of the minister) as a principled means by which we may reduce the tensions and synodical divisions over the ordination of women to the priesthood. Such legislation should provide for Standing Committee to monitor and report to Synod on the operation of lay and diaconal administration of the Lord’s Supper at the conclusion of the trial.”

Archbishop Harry Goodhew did not agree with that recommendation.

22. In his Presidential Address in 1998, Archbishop Goodhew stated -

“I respect the interpretation of Scripture adopted in the Church Catholic for nearly 2000 years...I feel the weight of the arguments advanced by those who hold that in a significantly changed social environment, faithfulness to God might mean that the same revealed truth needs to be expressed in a different way...If you ask me whether I withhold my consent if such a decision were made, my decision...would be tentative but I would not withhold consent.”

23. In answer to a question at the 1998 Synod, Archbishop Goodhew stated -

“My own personal convictions would not cause me to decline to sign into effect a Bill duly passed by the Synod permitting women to be made priests.”

24. In 1998 the following motion moved at the Synod was lost –

“This Synod dissents from any implication that the argument for the ordination of women must necessarily justify the ordination of practising homosexuals.”

25. 1999 was the fourth consecutive year in which the consideration of the ordination of women as presbyters was on the agenda of the Synod with a further bill for the adoption of the General Synod Canon. This time, instead of *requesting* the Archbishop not to appoint women as rectors (as in 1996), the bill had a *requirement* that a priest who is a woman shall not be licensed as the rector of a parish. After discussion, it was decided that the matter should not take precedence over other scheduled business, and was not debated further.

26. In 1999, the Synod received a report from the Diocesan Doctrine Commission on “The Doctrine of the Trinity.” This followed a request from the April 1999 meeting of the Standing Committee which made reference to the fact that “the doctrine of the Trinity has been used in debate to support both an egalitarian and a subordination model for male and female roles in ministry and marriage.” The Commission made the following comments in the conclusion of its report –

“There may be only a few texts which deal directly with the issue of whether women may be presbyters as such, but the texts themselves are part of a whole network of material in the Bible about men and women, creation, redemption, the authority of Scripture and about the nature of God.”

“The Doctrine Commission agrees that the concept of ‘subordination’ has significant implications. It concludes, furthermore, that the concept of ‘functional subordination’, of equality of essence with order in relation, represents the long-held teaching of the church, and that it is securely based on the revelation of the Scriptures. This teaching should, therefore, determine our commitment both to the equality of men and women in creation and salvation, and also to appropriately biblical expressions of the functional differences between men and women in home and church.”

27. In 2000, the General Synod Canon which was deferred in 1999 was again on the notice paper. It was not debated further.

28. In his Presidential Address in 2001, Archbishop Peter Jensen talked about the “principled stands of this Synod in previous years”, especially that –

“the ministry of women does not include the ministry of eldership of the congregations. Here is a point at which as a whole we have deliberately but painfully resisted the call of many brothers and sisters whom we respect and admire, but also the call of the community in which we live.”

He went on –

“I think that our position has been biblically and theologically vindicated. It is my conviction...that we have been called upon in our time to bear witness to the need for men and women to have overlapping but different roles in home and church,”

and –

“I think that the ministry of women has been aided by the stand we have taken.”

29. In 2003 Archbishop Jensen stated-

“I know that some of you grieve deeply and sincerely about my unwillingness to adopt this development [women’s ordination.] For my part, and I too am saddened, on that day for the first time my denomination wrote into its charter-documents a practice which is contrary to the Bible’s teaching.”

He went on –

“if the priesting of women was wrong on scriptural grounds, it cannot be right to accept women bishops.”

30. In 2004, with the issue of women bishops before the Anglican Church of Australia, Archbishop Jensen said –

“The consecration of women bishops...raise issues of authority, unity and mission. You all know my opinion, that the consecration of women bishops would be unbiblical.”

and –

“If our view of God’s word is correct, we will be able to show first that our distinction between men and women is actually good for us and for our society.”

Conclusion

31. Standing Committee notes that the issue has had much attention over nearly 30 years. There have been three Doctrine Commission reports, several other diocesan reports and discussions, two whole-day conferences, and many hours of debate at the Synod. The bill before us has been debated in substantially the same form as the one proposed at this Synod on two previous occasions (1992, 1996) and was presented again in 1999 and 2000. Each time, the Synod has either voted against the bill or declined to proceed with it.

For and on behalf of the Standing Committee

DR PHILIP SELDEN

10 October 2006