

Ordination of Women to the Diaconate

Report of the Diocesan Doctrine Commission

(This report was prepared in response to a request for further comment on the conclusion of the Diocesan Doctrine Commission in 1985 that "we do not consider any Scriptural objections exist to the ordination of women to the Diaconate as described in our formularies".)

1. In commenting on the possible ordination of women to the diaconate in the Anglican Church of Australia, several points need to be made.
2. The ministry of a deacon in the New Testament is undefined though certain qualifications are set down in I Tim. 3:8-13, but these make no mention of teaching gifts or abilities. They likewise seem to refer exclusively to males, though there may have been at least one recognised woman deacon in the New Testament Church, viz. Phoebe, Rom. 16:1. We are not told what she did. Likewise the 1662 Ordinal does not explicitly define a deacon, but refers to the qualifications for a function of the office.
3. In the New Testament there were many ministries by which Christian men and women served one another in the congregation. However, the ministry of leadership in the congregation was only discharged by men and yet not every man but only those who were judged to have the knowledge and the gifts for teaching the Word of God with authority to the people of God in the congregation (I Tim. 3:2, II Tim. 2:22,24, Tit. 1:9). This was not a ministry God gave to women in the congregation (I Tim. 2:12 ff).
4. The wording of the Anglican 1662 Ordinal assumes and prays that those ordained deacons will advance from the "inferior order" to the priesthood. This prayer had been removed from the AAPB service of making deacons, and also from the 1985 General Synod's new service. It is important to note that the Act of Parliament in England, which changed the law of the Church to allow women to be ordained deacons, at the same time removed the expectation in the Ordinal that women deacons should advance to the priesthood.
5. The 1662 Ordinal has included in the ministry of the deacon a conditional permission to preach in the congregation if so licensed by the Bishop. The Ordinal regards deacons as liturgical and pastoral assistants to the priest. They are to read the Scripture (especially the Gospel at the Lord's Supper) and to catechise the young. They assist in the administration at the Lord's Supper and in the absence of the priest they may baptise. In the Bishop's charge a reference is made to deacons preaching (i.e. they may) but unlike the priest, their licence must specifically state this. It is not, it seems, germane to their role. A deacon is to preach only if licensed. Any appropriate preaching limitation could conceivably be included in the Bishop's licence, although this is unlikely and is not done in the licensing of lay women in the Diocese to preach.
6. However, the Canon of General Synod (passed subsequent to the finalisation of the Doctrine Commission's report) permitting women to be ordained deacons has not yet excluded from the Ordinal the expectation that women deacons will become priests, who exercise a leadership and teaching which Scripture makes clear is not a ministry in the congregation to which God calls women.
7. In conclusion, there do not appear to us to be Scriptural reasons preventing a woman from assuming the ministry envisaged in the service for the making of deacons. However, we judge that Scriptural principles preclude a woman from assuming the ministry envisaged in the Ordinal for the ordering of priests. Thus, if it is judged that the making of a deacon confers, other things being equal, a necessary progression to the priesthood, then we believe the teaching of the New Testament would prevent the admission of women to the diaconate. However, if the making of a deacon opens a possible but not necessary admission to the priesthood, it becomes more a matter of judgement, rather than theology or church order, as to whether it is appropriate or not to ordain women to the diaconate.

For and on behalf of the Doctrine Commission

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Note: This report was received by the Synod of the Diocese of Sydney in October 1987.