

Restricted licensing of women priests and theological objections to the ordination of women to the priesthood

(A report from the Diocesan Doctrine Commission)

1. The task given to the Doctrine Commission

1.1 In May 1999 the Standing Committee requested the Diocesan Doctrine Commission to report to the Synod on a number of matters including the following question.

"having regard to the fact that licensing in addition to but separate from ordination is the pre-requisite for appointment to parish incumbency, whether a restriction on licensing women as incumbents would meet the theological reasons previously advanced with respect to restricting the ordination of women to the priesthood."

2. The theological reasons previously advanced restricting women priests

2.1 The theological reasons previously advanced with respect to restricting the ordination of women to the priesthood can be found in the substantial report of the Diocesan Doctrine Commission to the Synod in 1985. The Commission concluded that women are not to assume the authoritative teaching office that properly belongs to men in the Christian congregation. In our own context this would not appear to exclude absolutely the possibility of women preaching or teaching in church. It nevertheless appears to exclude the possibility of women exercising the role of a teaching elder or "priest" as that term is defined by the Anglican Ordinal. (Sec 4.7)

2.2 The Commission advanced a number of theological reasons for this position primarily founded on its analysis of relevant Biblical material. These can be summarised as follows –

- (a) 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. (Sec 4.2)
- (b) The Bible connects the relationship of men and women in the family with relationships in a Christian congregation. (Sec 4.3)
- (c) The picture of the congregation that emerges from the New Testament is one in which we recognise the presence of leaders or elders with the authority of an office appointed to teach. (Sec. 4.3) Together with Apostles and their assistants, these elders are the only ones specifically said to rule in church. This self-sacrificial ruling is related to their functioning as pastors and teachers. (Sec 4.8)
- (d) Women are not to assume this authoritative teaching office that properly belongs to men in the Christian congregation. (Sec 4.7) (The shift from "wives" in 4.2 to "women" at this point is made without argument.)
- (e) The role of a teaching elder or "priest" as that term is defined by the Anglican Ordinal is a contemporary equivalent to the New Testament pastor-teacher/elder. (This is asserted without argument in sec 4.7)
- (f) Therefore, because, as Article XX states, it is not lawful for the Church to enact anything that is contrary to God's word written (Sec 1.5) the existing practice of restricting to men admission to the priesthood as defined in our formularies is to be upheld. (Sec 5.7)

3. The question to be decided

3.1 The Doctrine Commission has not been asked to evaluate these reasons but to investigate whether they might lead to another conclusion, namely that women ought not be incumbents, rather than they ought not be priests. In other words, would it be consistent with the perceived New Testament restrictions on women from being authoritative teaching elders for a woman to be an assistant priest or a women priest with some other responsibility other than that of a rector or curate in charge?

3.2 In the Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church of Australia there are two separate and distinct steps by which, in the words of Article XXIII, ministers are called and sent "into the Lord's vineyard." Ordination is the setting apart of a person into an order of minister, be it deacon, priest or bishop. The appointment and licence of the bishop of the diocese (in our case the Archbishop) is the means by which, among other things, the ordained minister is given a particular sphere of responsibility and authority to minister. An incumbent (or curate in charge which for the purposes of this issue are the same) is a person given the responsibility for "the control of the policy organisation and affairs" of all parish organisations in a particular parish (clause 43(1) of the Church Administration Ordinance 1990) and to conduct divine

service and preach and teach the people. The question before the Commission is whether on the arguments advanced, a woman can be a priest as long as she is not given the authority to be an incumbent.

3.3 The Commission decided to approach the matter by first looking at the Ordinal, and then seeing if there are any good arguments for restricted licensing, but not a restriction on ordination, meeting the theological reasons previously advanced.

4. The Ordinal's doctrine of the presbyterate/priesthood

4.1 The 1985 report of the Doctrine Commission moved from its conclusion that the New Testament taught that "women are not to assume the authoritative teaching office that properly belongs to men in the Christian congregation" to the further application that this excludes "the possibility of women exercising the role of a teaching elder or 'priest' as that term is defined by the Anglican Ordinal." (Sec 4.7) The Report did not justify this step and so the Commission thought it would be important to see how the role of a "priest" is indeed defined by the Anglican Ordinal and whether it is the equivalent to that of the teaching elder in the New Testament.

4.2 The Ordinal presents the office of priest as that of the oversight of the church of Christ. The bishop's exhortation to the candidates reminds them of "how weighty an Office and Charge ye are called: that is to say, to be Messengers, Watchmen, and Stewards of the Lord; to teach, premonish, to feed and provide for the Lord's family and to seek for Christ's sheep". It is not however a general oversight but of a people "committed to your charge," and of "the church and congregation whom you must serve." The purpose of the oversight is "to bring all such as are or shall be committed to your charge unto that agreement in the faith and knowledge of God, and to that perfectness of age in Christ, that there be no place left among you, either for error in religion, or for viciousness in life." From the questions to the candidate it is clear that this oversight is primarily exercised in authoritative teaching.

4.3 The prayer before the laying on of hands explicitly shows that the Ordinal presents the order of priest as a continuation of the New Testament ministers of Ephesians 4.

"Almighty God and heavenly Father, who of thine infinite love and goodness towards us, hast given to thy only Son Jesus Christ to be our Redeemer and the Author of everlasting life; who after he had made perfect our redemption by his death, and was ascended into heaven, sent abroad into the world his Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists Doctors and Pastors, by whose labour and ministry he gathered together a great flock in all parts of the world to the eternal praise of thy holy Name: For these so great benefits of thy eternal goodness, and that *thou hast vouchsafed to call these thy servants to the same Office and Ministry appointed for the salvation of mankind*, we render unto thee most hearty thanks, we praise and worship thee".

4.4 Given this, it is clear that the New Testament restrictions on the ministry of women as discerned in the 1985 report would apply to the priest as presented in the Ordinal. How then can the question of a mere restriction of licence even be raised? It is because it could be argued that in certain circumstances a priest does not function like the priest of the Ordinal and that we might question whether the New Testament restrictions on women need not apply in such circumstances. The Commission evaluated three such possible arguments which could over turn the strong prima face case so far presented.

5. The argument "A priest who is an assistant does not have an authoritative teaching elder role."

5.1 This particular argument asserts that although people may be in the order of priest, unless they are incumbents they cannot exercise the actual ministry of the priest as presented in the ordinal. Only the person licensed as the incumbent is given a cure or charge to oversee. The assistant priest is in functional terms a defacto deacon assisting the priest. Thus, it is argued, the New Testament restrictions on women's ordination do not apply to such assistant priests, just as the 1985 report concluded they do not apply to deacons.

5.2 The premise of this argument, that only incumbents have the real ministry of priests has led some to argue the opposite conclusion, namely that no one at all, man or woman, should be ordained to serve as an assistant priest. This would seem to be a more consistent approach than ordaining women priests knowing that they were restricted from ever really functioning as such because of the restriction on incumbency.

5.3 We can go further. More importantly, ordain someone to an order they could never in principle fulfil is unjustifiable. It is contrary to the intention of the ordination service itself and is thus such an ordination would be a self contradictory or incoherent action. (This is different from ordaining someone who, as things turn out, never actually functions as a priest. Such a case is irregular, inappropriate, even disappointing, but not incoherent as such.)

5.4 The only way such an action would be made coherent would be if the meaning of ordination to the order of priest were to be changed. The Commission believes that if the practice of ordaining people to an order of priest that in principle cannot be incumbents were adopted, then in effect a new order of ministry is being created which, confusingly, would have the same name as another order of ministry, namely "priest". This would be unjustifiable.

5.5 But is the premise that only incumbents have the real ministry of priests sound? Within the Commission a case was put that although it is clear the Ordinal presents what we call incumbency as the central focus of its understanding of the order of priest, it does not as such restrict the ministry of priest only to those in incumbency. This view holds that assistant priests actually exercise the ministry of priest as set out in the Ordinal rather than serve as potential priests waiting to become incumbents. And so the incumbent and his assistant priest are to be regarded as a college of presbyters or elders together sharing responsibility for the people "committed to your charge," and "the church and congregation whom you must serve", albeit not equally, and one under the direction of the other. Some reasons advanced for this interpretation of the Ordinal were as follows.

The Ordinal never explicitly denies the possibility of a sphere of ministry responsibility or cure being shared in some sense. To read it as excluding a shared priestly responsibility is therefore to read in more than is said and to assume a too narrow understanding of Anglican priesthood involving only mono-ministry.

Although the Book of Common Prayer assumes that normally one man will have responsibility in each parish, there are indications that others may share the work with him.

While the Prayer Book language for the incumbent is the Curate, the later use of the term "Assistant Curates" for those who assist him indicates that such were understood to share in some way in the cure. While this argument from later usage does not have direct authority as to the meaning of the Prayer Book, it does indicate that for quite some time in Anglican history the Ordinal was understood to allow a sharing of the cure of the Incumbent in some sense.

At the time of the Book of Common Prayer itself there were colleges of priests in such institutions as cathedral chapters. So the Ordinal could not have been intended to exclude in principle shared priestly ministry.

Certainly the New Testament seems to envisage that a college of presbyters was the common and expected phenomenon in the churches of the time. If this case is sound then an assistant priest is not to be regarded as a defacto deacon simply assisting the real priest but instead as a member of the "college" or team of teaching elders in that church.

5.6 However, the contrary case was also presented to the Commission. It was argued that the Ordinal does restrict the cure and charge of a particular congregation to one priest only and that there is no real substance in the argument that the Book of Common Prayer envisages the possibility of a "college" of elders.

5.7 However the Commission was unable to assess each claim fully at this stage and left the matter open. It raises the issue here as a possible reading of the Ordinal which would offer a substantial objection to the proposition that a restriction on licensing women as incumbents would meet the theological reasons previously advanced with respect to restricting the ordination of women to the priesthood.

5.8 The Commission concluded that the argument discussed in this section that a restriction on licensing women as incumbents would meet the theological reasons previously advanced with respect to restricting the ordination of women to the priesthood fails. It fails because it would be an incoherent action to ordain person to a ministry they can not in principle fulfil. And it may also fail because the premise that assistant priests do not really engage in priestly ministry may well be false.

6. The argument "A priest who is an assistant has a derived authority only and so has no headship."

6.1 It may be argued that a woman priest who is not an incumbent does not transgress the New Testament restriction on women being teaching elders because she ministers under the authority or headship of the incumbent.

6.2 This argument is open to exactly the same rejoinder as that previous one; that it really is an argument not to ordain any assistant as a priests, not to ordain women. (See above 5.2-4)

6.3 However we have no need to accept the argument in the first place. The assumption that a minister can't be exercising headship functions because she/he is under the authority of another minister gains a superficial plausibility from the fact that the human body only has one head. By analogy it might be thought that a church can only have one person acting in a headship function. But this is a misuse of the image. A wife has one husband and so one only is the head of his wife. But in the ordered relationship in church the minister is not head of the church. The issue is rather that in order to preserve the headship of the husband to his own wife, the ministry of authoritative teaching leadership should be exercised by men only.

6.4 Further, it would be false to claim that because someone ministers under the authority of another then their ministry has only derived authority. To be an assistant who comes alongside another is not the same as being a vicar who simply represents the other. The fact that an assistant priest is authorised or under the direction of another does not mean he/she is exercising no authoritative ministry in himself or herself. To suggest so would be to present a far too narrow and "top down" understanding of ministerial authority. After all, the incumbent is authorised by the diocesan bishop but still has an authoritative oversight of that church. Why not also the assistant priest, authorised by the bishop and working under the direction of the incumbent?

6.5 The Commission concluded that a priest functioning under the authority of another is still exercising an authoritative teaching office. The New Testament restrictions would apply to women assistant priests not just women incumbents.

7. The argument "A priest who is not licensed to a church has no elder role or authority"

7.1 A number of those ordained priest are neither incumbents nor assistant priests but function in other ministries. Chaplains and the like function in quasi incumbent and assistant priest roles and are covered by the pervious arguments. However some priests function in ways that are some distance from the ordinal's understanding of the office of priest in such things as lecturing in theological colleges, working in missionary support agencies, running central diocesan departments of education or evangelism and the like. Could it be argued that women priests in these functions would not fall foul of the New Testament restrictions?

7.2 In practice it may well be that a woman priest in one of these extra parochial ministries would not in fact be exercising an authoritative teaching elder role. However, these roles are on the edge of the Ordinal's focus on priesthood, as valuable as they are, and to ordain someone just to perform such ministries without the possibility of more central priestly ministry would even more readily fall under the previous criticism of being an incoherent act than even ordaining some as assistant priests only. (See above 5.3, 5.4)

7.3 The Commission concluded that the existence of some ordained to the order of priest who may not in fact exercise a mainstream priestly ministry gives no good reason to hold that women could be ordained to such roles if they were in principle prevented from exercising the more central ministry of the order. Restricted in principle priesthood is untenable.

8. Conclusion

8.1 The Doctrine Commission believes that there is no good reason to conclude that a restriction on licensing women as incumbents would meet those theological reasons previously advanced with respect to restricting the ordination of women to the priesthood.

9. Postscript: A limit on the cure or charge?

9.1 So far the whole discussion has been on restricting the degree of oversight and responsibility of a woman priest as possibly meeting those theological reasons previously advanced with respect to restricting the ordination of women to the priesthood. However the Commission thought it wise briefly to comment on another possibility. Could it be argued that a restriction, not on the degree of oversight or

responsibility, but on the kind of cure or charge given to a woman priest would meet those theological reasons previously advanced with respect to restricting the ordination of women to the priesthood? To be more specific, could a woman still be a priest, even as an incumbent or its equivalent role, but only in churches or ministries in which there are no men. Such ministries might include girl's schools or women's ministry training institutions. In this case, it might be argued, the restriction is simply of the particular people "committed to your charge," and of "the church and congregation whom you must serve." (Ordinal) There would be no change in the actual nature of the priesthood.

9.2 This possibility was not considered by the 1985 report. When it concluded that "women are not to assume the authoritative teaching office that properly belongs to men in the Christian congregation" it assumed a mixed congregation of men and women. Would a congregation only of women make a difference to this conclusion? The Commission believes that it would. The restriction on women's ministry is not absolute but only in relation to men. Where there are no men this consideration is irrelevant.

9.3 However, once the nature of the priesthood as presented in the Ordinal is considered, the case collapses. The Prayer Book envisages the priesthood as an office which is in itself unrestricted and available to be appointed in principle to any congregation. The words of the prayer at the laying on of hands make this clear.

Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office of and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed to thee by the Imposition of our hands.

The person becomes a priest in the church of God, not just a particular congregation or set of congregations. Of course, as the word spoken at the handing over of the Bible make clear, this priesthood is exercised in a particular place, "the Congregation, where thou shall be lawfully appointed thereunto."

9.4 While sheer issues of time and space and age restrict the number of actual congregations a priest can be appointed to, this is not a principle restriction. But if a priest were ordained on the condition that he or she cannot in principle be appointed to a whole class of congregations then a restriction in principle has been introduced and it no longer is clearly "the Office of and Work of a Priest in the *Church of God*". In effect "priests" for women only congregations would be a new (sub) order of ministry.

9.5 Furthermore there are problems with the notion of a congregation for one sex only. We can leave aside the practical question of whether any such women only congregations or churches exist in reality and how wise it would be to ordain women priests who could only serve in such limited situations because this is in itself not a doctrinal question. However it is worth asking whether a congregation or church which in principle restricts membership by sex is doctrinally permissible given the inclusiveness of Christ. It would not do simply to appoint a woman priest to a congregation or cure which just happened to include no men. The ministry would have to exclude them in principle. But then is it "the Church of God"? The Commission believes that single sex in principle congregations are not doctrinally sound and that what may be a theoretical possibility of women priests for cures without men is not a way to proceed.

9.6 Although a number of interesting issues are raised by this suggestion, the Commission concluded that a restriction of the licence to the type of cure still would not meet the theological reasons previously advanced with respect to restricting the ordination of women to the priesthood.

For and on behalf of the Diocesan Doctrine Commission

PAUL BARNETT
Chairman

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