

8/87 The Ministry of Women

(This report was received by the Synod of the Diocese of Sydney in October 1988.)

1. Introduction

1.1 In October 1987, the 41st Synod of the Diocese of Sydney passed a resolution which asked the Doctrine Commission "to report 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".

1.2 The Commission has gladly undertaken this task, as it gives opportunity to put the case for women's ministry positively and to make some practical suggestions about the way in which our church may more adequately reflect NT thought about the pattern of congregational life in today's world. We have in view of the Synod's resolution, addressed ourselves to certain aspects of diocesan and parochial organisation and have in the course of the report made certain suggestions in that regard.

1.3 The Commission has chosen to make a short statement rather than produce a long theological report (such as its earlier *Report on the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood* 9/84). This is because it wishes to make its views known in a way that will have wide and immediate impact. In this case, therefore, the more detailed biblical arguments are omitted from the report itself, but they are in essentials no different from that given in the earlier Report. We recognise however that this is a relatively new area of theological reflection and that our findings may be subject to modification in the light of further consideration of scripture by the whole Christian community.

2. Unity - Complementarity

2.1 The Pauline affirmation, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28) is a charter for our unity of access to God. God's way of dealing with persons, whatever their social, religious, ethnic or gender differences is the same: it is by faith in Christ that they become his children. The consequences of this great fact involve both unity and complementarity.

2.2 We are one in Christ, and each one approaches God on exactly the same basis. We are members of one Body and owe each other the same great debt of love. We are inspired by the one Holy Spirit and work together for the same end, the glory of God. We have all received gifts from God for the service of others. We have all received the same exhortation to minister (or "serve") with our gifts. We all grow into the maturity of being like our one Lord, Jesus Christ.

2.3 As with a body, so the gifts are various but complementary. "All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apports to each one individually as he wills" (1 Corinthians 12:11). The equality of persons before God is matched by a variety in the gifts. Some gifts are more significant than others. The possession of a gift carries with it no right of itself to use it. The use of gifts is restricted by considerations such as edification and good order (1 Corinthians 14) and the needs of others.

2.4 The Commission wishes to affirm that the NT does not give any grounds for difference between the sexes in the areas of our acceptance by God, our call to ministry or the fact that all have gifts for service. When we limit the ministry of women by rules or practices over and above the NT, we deprive the church of the benefits of the service of some of its members and to that extent frustrate their legitimate desire to serve Christ.

2.5 The NT also witnesses to the presence in the churches of deacons and elders fulfilling the work of caring and pastoring. The qualifications for such offices include both spiritual gifts and Christian maturity; they are not open to all persons but only those qualified and recognised.

2.6 In considering the matters referred to us by the Synod in its resolution, we have borne in mind the principles and practice of ministry as set out in the Ordinal which has placed the Anglican Church, in common with other churches of the 16th century Reformation, in continuance of the tradition of an ordained ministry as an integral part of the life of the Christian Church.

3. Ministry of Women in the New Testament

3.1 Jesus' attitudes to and care of women was considerably more positive than his contemporaries. Women were ministered to and taught by him. For their part they supported him by their presence and material gifts, and were the first witnesses of his resurrection.

3.2 Women engaged in ministry within the New Testament. Euodia and Syntyche labour side by side with Paul in evangelism (Philippians 4:3). Priscilla with Aquila apparently took a major part in adding to the somewhat deficient knowledge of Apollos (Acts 18:26). The Pastorals enjoin older women to teach younger women (Titus 2:4) and also, by implication, children (2 Timothy 1:5; 3:15). Paul's injunction that a woman should learn is in contrast with the Rabbinic prohibition of women learning the Scriptures. Women were also involved in prophesying - the four daughters of Philip in Caesarea (Acts 21:9), the women of Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:5; cf. Revelation 2:20).

3.3 In our view the evidence cited for women apostles (Romans 16:7) and deacons (Romans 16:1; 1 Timothy 3:11) is ambiguous and capable of divergent interpretations. Thus these texts may not be used unequivocally to support the view that women may exercise these ministries.

3.4 It is apparent from the above that women in the NT were engaged in public ministry both inside and outside church. The status of both men and women in Christ gave both sexes the privilege of prayer and prophecy in the assembly as appropriate.

3.5 On the other hand, Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 establish limitations in the way such ministries were conducted whether by men or women. Because a certain functional ordering exists between God, and Christ, and men and women (1 Corinthians 11:3), both sexes are to retain the outward distinctiveness of their sex when they are exercising public ministries of prayer and prophecy. Women who prophesied were to cover their heads so as to honour their husbands in the first instance in the public exercise of their ministry. Men were to prophesy with head uncovered so as to honour their head (Christ). Both men and women therefore are qualified to prophesy/pray in the church, provided that the sexual distinctions which exist within the created order are preserved.

3.6 The effect of Paul's words elsewhere limited the teaching office to those men suitably qualified and recognised. Women are not to teach men for this would be an exercise of authority over them. Rather women are to learn "in quietness and submission" (1 Timothy 2:11-12). The basis for this is that an order of creation exists, taught in Genesis 2, an order disturbed by sin in the fall (1 Timothy 2:13). This crucial and prohibitive text is regarded as universal in application because it is preceded by a general directive related to prayer in the church and is followed by a general directive about the qualification of the church teacher.

3.7 Our conclusion based on scripture is that a woman is not permitted to assume the office of teacher within the congregation.

4. Conclusion: Church and Society Today

4.1 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".

4.2 We believe, however, that a woman may "speak" in church in a number of ways, e.g. to prophesy, exhort or testify. There appears to be no restriction based on sex on the speaking activities in 1 Corinthians 14:26, which refers to hymns, words of instruction, revelation, tongues and interpretation. We take the prohibition in 1 Corinthians 14:34 as referring to the evaluation of prophecy.

4.3 Contemporary preaching is not identical with teaching in the NT. Preaching covers a whole range of activities, including teaching, evangelism, encouragement, exhortation, prophecy and testimony. Teaching in the NT refers to the faithful transmission and defence of apostolic doctrine or passing on the fundamental structures of the faith. Admonition, prophecy, exhortation and encouragement are derived from this teaching ministry.

4.4 As is the case with all Christian ministry however (see 2.3, 2.4 above) the privilege of exercising ministry depends on the context. Under certain circumstances, a woman may be involved in any of those preaching activities listed above. She may speak in the contemporary congregation, provided that she does not take the responsibility for the teaching of the faith in the family congregation: the teaching function is not hers for the reasons given in scripture (1 Timothy 2:11-13).

4.5 It would be impossible, however, to separate altogether the teaching element out of almost any "sermon". Such would be quite artificial. Every Christian has a teaching role within the congregation, according to Colossians 3:16, and this would surely impinge on any publicly spoken word to the congregation by men or women.

4.6 Furthermore, the passing of the years has changed the pattern of congregational life. The ordinary "family congregation" is not the only kind of congregation within the pluralities of modern society. Today there are single sex congregations of primary and secondary children. There are congregations of women only in colleges and hospitals. There are congregations of university undergraduates who are mostly single. If the Pastorals encourage women to teach women and children, we believe it appropriate to appoint women as chaplains in women's institutions, authorised to preach and preside at the Lord's Supper. The point is that while 1 Timothy 2:11-15 applies still to "family congregations", not all congregations today fall into that category.

Members of the Commission who participated in the preparation of this Report were Bishop E. D. Cameron, Dr D.B. Knox, Dr P. T. O'Brien, Dr P. W. Barnett, Dss M. A. Rodgers, Dr P. F. Jensen, The Rev R. E. Lamb, The Rev J. G. Mason, and The Rev R. Bowles. Dss E. Mathieson was on leave of absence overseas during the relevant period. Dss Rodgers was unable to attend the final two meetings of the Commission.

[Appended note: Two members of the Commission did not subscribe to the point of view expressed in paragraph 4.6 that women should, under certain circumstances, be authorised to preside at the Lord's Supper.]

12 July 1988

Endnote

The resolution referred to in paragraph 1.1 of this report is -

"Synod -

- (a) expresses its appreciation and gratitude for the Christian ministry of women in the Diocese and in particular for those women who are working in a full-time basis in ministry;
- (b) endorses the action of the Standing Committee as reported in item 2 of its supplementary report, but directs the Standing Committee to change its request to the Diocesan Doctrine Commission and ask it to report 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; and
- (c) directs the Standing Committee to investigate and implement means of encouraging and supporting the full-time ministries of women in the Diocese."