

An open letter from the Reverend Lindsay Southern to the Archbishops regarding their proposed amendments

Dear Archbishop Williams and Archbishop Sentamu,

It is with great dismay and disappointment that I read your proposed amendments to the Women Bishop's draft legislation issued on Monday 21st June. I doubt there are many who will feel this offers good news. Far from being attentive to the full diversity of voices within the Church of England, these amendments suggest that you, our Archbishops, are primarily concerned with a particularly vocal minority. Neither do you seem to trust that the Legislative Drafting Committee have, in fact, been extremely attentive to the diversity of voices for the past year and have worked hard to come up with the current proposals. There is nothing to suggest, for example, that you are listening to the voices of those who signed petitions in 2008 requesting a single clause measure. Or those, like WATCH, who have made it clear that the proposed legislation already demands many concessions and compromises from the simple single clause measure they requested and which has been favoured by all other Anglican provinces who have chosen to open the episcopate to women.

There will be many who will be unable to support the proposed transfer arrangements and continual public undermining of women's spiritual authority implicit in these amendments (paragraph 6), even if it means proceeding sooner rather than later.

The smoke and mirror strategy of giving jurisdiction by virtue of the Measure, rather than transfer or delegation in effect implies that the Church of England as a whole is ambiguous about the identity and authority of both Bishops who are female and male priests who accept their ministry. This is a dangerous precedent to set and leaves women in ministry vulnerable as they, along with every Christian, continue the battle against the principalities and powers of darkness but without the full support of the Church that recognised and authorised their divine calling to ordained ministry. It is a poor consolation prize to offer consecrated women fuller legal rights with one hand (para 15.1) while continuing to set up structures that call into question their spiritual authority (paragraph 13). The interpretation of the Lambeth Conference resolution (1998) which undergirds this proposal (para 2) fails to recognise that both those who assent to and those who dissent to the ordination of women to the priesthood are loyal Anglicans because what we hold in common; our love for Christ, our common identity as brothers and sisters in Christ, takes precedence over our disagreement over differing understandings of the Episcopal authority. Status as loyal Anglicans is not a *carte blanche* to demand special provisions.

I refute completely that the Church of England has managed to operate a practical polity (para 13). The practical polity is in fact extremely dysfunctional, cripples the ministry of women, in some diocese more than

others, and has done nothing to bring about greater communion, but instead fosters division and discrimination and continues to damage the Church.

Many people on both sides of the debate have struggled with the Act of Synod because they are committed to making it work and will continue to wrestle with whatever General Synod manages to agree upon, because of their love for the communities this Church serves, often despite the toxic legacy of the Act. This is illustrated by the fact that Prayer Vigils will take place around the country, in Ripon, Guildford, Newcastle and Lichfield Cathedrals, during the General Synod debates, genuinely drawing together the diversity of voices to which you refer, but to whom you clearly have not listened.

Where ever the solution may lie to the question of how to bring about Women Bishops, I think it is unlikely to manifest itself in the creation of Church of England ghettos that will further isolate those who are opposed and fatally undermine the ministry of those who assent and have the unenviable task of making such convoluted proposals work.

Where are the proposals that will in fact ensure that we simply have Bishops? Consecrated because we have discerned God's calling and gifting within them, regardless of those things that are declared unimportant in relation to our identity in Christ; race, gender, social status? Where are the proposals that will enable them to fulfil that role with joy, confidence and the minimum of hindrance?

When will the Church of England accept that to set up structures that implicitly infer that some people are less a child of God than others is just poor theology and a stumbling block to our proclamation of the gospel?

I realise that the sound of our church in great pain as it labours to bring something into new birth is difficult for you both, as our Archbishops, and for many others to hear. But it would be good for you to recognise that the expression of pain is not necessarily an indication that something is fundamentally wrong. The Church of England, through Synod, declared many decades ago that there were, in fact, no theological objections to women's ordained ministry. I would like to see it support its statements with clear and unambiguous actions.

Your sister in Christ,

Lindsay Southern

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