

celebrated W.A.T.C.H. women Women And The Church

REVEREND DR JOYCE BENNETT

A service was held in High Wycombe on 1st December 2006 to celebrate the 35th anniversary of the ordination to the priesthood of the Rev. Dr. Joyce Bennett. She herself was able to preside at the service.

Born in 1923, and educated at Burlington School, Joyce took a degree in History and a PGCE at the University of London. Although she felt a call to missionary work, she taught for two years at Horwell Grammar School in Launceston while assessing her vocation. 'As I look back, I realise there was no other path for me.'

Accepted for training by the Church Missionary Service (CMS) in 1947, to her surprise, Joyce found herself assigned to a group studying for work in China. She expressed her concern: 'I can't sing in tune!' Chinese is a tonal language and difficult to learn. The Holy Spirit thought otherwise. In 1949 she was in Hong Kong on the staff of St. Stephen's Girls' College, founded by CMS. Ten happy and fulfilling years followed, during which time she gained valuable experience, paving the way for a major contribution to the work of education in Hong Kong. Following a Diploma in Theology at King's, London, she was for a short time chaplain at the ecumenical Chung Chi College, later to become part of the Chinese University.

In 1961, Bishop Ronald Hall broached the subject of ordination to the Diaconate. As is well known, he had already ordained Florence Lee Tim Oi priest in 1944, the only person available to minister to the Anglican community in Macau, swollen with refugees from the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong and much of China. In 1958, he had ordained a faithful evangelist, Jane Hwang as Deacon and wanted Joyce to follow suit. He further asked her to take the lead in developing and becoming Principal of a new Secondary School, St Catherine's School for Girls, in one of the new industrial areas of Hong Kong, surrounded by shacks and vast numbers of poor people. At first she declined; CMS policy at that time was that local people should run institutions and missionaries take second place. Bishop Hall taught her a vital lesson: that in God's economy the needs of people take precedence over man-made policies and principles. This was later to be an important factor when Deacons Jane Hwang and Joyce Bennett were ordained priest.

The school was to pioneer a new approach to secondary education, in which academic and technical education would be combined. The curriculum would be flexible so that girls could study courses they could enjoy and in which they could do well, catering for the least and the more academically gifted. In addition, the ethos and activities of the school would facilitate and encourage the social and spiritual aspects of their lives. Joyce had to be innovative. There was little or no



provision for training teachers in technical education and many had only been given the rudiments of teaching. Joyce had to equip herself and teach her teachers some of the principles. She had to do battle with the Education Department on a number of issues, but was asked to be a member of the Curriculum Development Committee. Many of the girls came from extremely poor families. It became apparent that several were being beaten and abused in other ways at home. The staff soon

learnt from Joyce that no-one was to be regarded as 'useless' or 'hopeless', nor looked down on as inferior. Pastoral care was firmly established.

Joyce's activities were not limited to the school. She assisted at the neighbouring Anglican church, St. Barnabas'. Her passionate concern for the social conditions in the area enabled her to advise local Government officials and Magistrates in the Juvenile Courts as well as to serve on some committees. She gained a reputation for being willing to speak out on matters of serious local concern. Many individuals sought her help. In 1976 the Governor, Sir Murray Maclehoose, invited her to become an Unofficial Member of the Legislative Council. He wanted to bring in people who had a much greater and direct involvement with all members of society, beyond the ranks of the Official Government representatives and members of the wealthy and business classes. Typically, Joyce said she had to clear this with her Bishop, this time Bishop Gilbert Baker, since this raised the whole question of the role of the church in politics, and such a high profile position would be against CMS policy. Bishop Baker enthusiastically supported her. This led to seven stimulating and profitable years at the centre of Hong Kong affairs. Her overall contribution was recognised with an OBE and an honorary Doctorate from the University of Hong Kong.

Inevitably, the ordination of women to the priesthood came to the fore. Eventually, the Anglican Consultative Council gave endorsement that the decision rested within each independent Province. Although the Anglican Province of China had ceased to exist under the Communist control of China, the Diocese of Hong Kong and Macau still operated within its Provincial Constitution and Canons. The Bishops of Southeast Asia were the guardians and gave their consent. Finally, the normally cautious and hesitant Bishop Baker took the courageous decision to go ahead. Echoing Joyce Bennett's own words about her call to mission, he said, 'I could do no other.' On Advent Sunday 1971, in St. John's

Cathedral, Hong Kong, the Rev Jane Hwang and the Rev Joyce Bennett were ordained priest.

Sadly, the Church of England would not accept Jane and Joyce when they were on a visit to England. They were forbidden to exercise any priestly ministry. Likewise, when Joyce retired in 1982 and was invited to assist and eventually look after the Chinese congregation at St. Martin-in-the-Fields the Bishop of London forbade any priestly ministry. True to her nature, Joyce, with anguish, accepted this, but was able to speak out boldly in favour of the priestly ordination of women – never militant, but a shining example.

It is a mark of Joyce's humility that at no point did she seek power or position. Authority is undoubtedly within her character and has definitely been enhanced by the Holy Spirit; but the various positions have happened to her as a

result of other people's initiatives. Let one of her first pupils at St Catherine's have the last word. 'I learnt that I was loved, and I learnt to love.' Joyce herself had learnt these from the Lord of Love, whom she has followed so obediently and faithfully.

Canon Stephen Sidebotham

Canon Stephen Sidebotham was Vicar of Christ Church in Hong Kong in 1971, a member of Diocesan Synod which passed the resolution in favour of Joyce's ordination, and was present at the service itself. He was subsequently Dean of St John's Cathedral, Hong Kong, and has known Joyce since 1964.

The quotations come from Joyce's book: 'This God Business', ISBN 962-488-348-3 published by the Religious Education Resource Centre in Hong Kong.

